

“O, little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by.
Yet, in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.”

This is the first verse of a poem that a certain Reverend Phillips Brooks wrote while on pilgrimage to the little town of Bethlehem. It was Christmas Eve, 1865, and Pastor Brooks had taken a sabbatical from his church and was in the Holy Land at this auspicious time. He had rented a horse and had ridden out under the stars, into the early night, to the town of Bethlehem. There he joined other pilgrims and walked with them down the legendary streets of Bethlehem on the special night of Christmas Eve.

The Reverend Phillips Brooks was in his day widely renowned as one of the best preachers in the United States. Such was his fame, that he was even invited to preach at Westminster Cathedral before Queen Victoria. A building at Harvard University bears his name. The first published volume of his sermons sold over 200,000 copies. Some of his sermons are still available online. And the Reverend Brooks was an Episcopalian!

Pastor Brooks began his career in 1861 as Rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Philadelphia. After only a year there, under his dynamic leadership, Sunday School attendance had grown from 30 children to over a thousand every Sunday. Eight years later, he was called to be the Rector of Boston’s Trinity Church (perhaps the most prestigious Episcopal church in the nation), and in 1891, he was elected bishop of Massachusetts.

Because of his fame as a great orator and preacher, he was asked to give the sermon when the funeral cortege bearing President Abraham Lincoln from Washington DC to Illinois stopped in Philadelphia in May of 1865.

But by December of 1865, the Reverend Phillips Brooks was a broken man. He had felt deeply the ravages of the War Between the States. The hate and intolerance of differing points of view had pained him greatly. The tragedy of the war was everywhere. Everyone he knew had a close friend or relative wounded, killed, or listed as missing in action in that miserable war. That war that claimed over 620,000 American lives in only four years: that’s over half of all the American soldiers who have ever died in all the wars in the history of this nation. Over half. Such bloodshed was incomprehensible, and on top of that came the murder of President Lincoln. Pastor Brooks found he could no longer minister to his congregation. He could no longer find the words of explanation or comfort that his parishioners sorely needed. He could no longer find the comfort and peace that he sorely needed.

So, with a soul sick with grief and weary with care, he went on sabbatical and sailed to the Holy Land, and on Christmas Eve he found himself walking the streets of Bethlehem. He visited the site where legend has it Jesus was born. He went out into the fields where it was said those Christmas Eve shepherds had kept their flocks by night. In

his diary he noted that still there were shepherds there with their flocks on his Christmas Eve.

That night, that experience, changed his life. His soul was stirred, his spirit was renewed. He wrote about a “singing in his soul” that seemed to be everlasting. Soon after, he sat down and wrote what we now cherish as the Christmas carol we all know as “O Little Town of Bethlehem.”

The Christmas Eve story is a story of anticipation, isn't it? We yearn. We wait. We plan. Something just ahead, just around the corner, waits for us. What can it be? Oh, I hope it's this. Oh, I pray it's not that.

Pastor Brooks wrote of the “hopes and fears” that meet on Christmas Eve, if not in the narrow streets of Bethlehem, then in our hearts as we ponder both the near and distant future on this Christmas Eve. We wonder about both the light and the dark – the hopes and the fears – that come together for us tonight on this Christmas Eve.

All Advent we have been trying to make ready, to “prepare the way,” as the Advent hymn tells us. Since Halloween (or maybe since Labor Day), we've been making lists, gathering ideas, looking at the budget, and listening to a thousand versions of *Jingle Bells* in every store we've gone into.

In quieter times, we've also been recalling the Christmases of times past. We've been thinking of friends and loved ones who are no longer with us, or of folks who used to be close, but now are distant from us for any of a dozen reasons. We may wish that we could go back to happier times. We may fear that our best times are behind us. Or we may cherish this time as the best time of all, as good as or better than any other time we've ever known. We may look forward to tomorrow morning as the much-anticipated pay-off. I can't wait to see the look on her face. Oh, how I love the cranberry muffins we always have. And just what the heck is that in that funny-shaped package under the tree?

All this activity tells us: something is coming. Something remarkable is on its way.

Every Christmas Eve, we are asked, as Christians, to reconsider the Christ Child. Just what does it mean to have the birth of this baby in our lives? In the history of our Western civilization, the impact of his birth and life has been huge for the world. But what about me, in my small world? What relevance does the birth and life of Christ have for me, now, here, in this place and at this time? How am I changed? How do my hopes and fears meet here on Christmas Eve?

Like Pastor Brooks, we too may have souls that are weary of the tragedy and strife of our dark world today. We too may struggle to comprehend the monumental loss of life and resources from fires, floods, hurricanes, and other disasters that have descended upon us. We mourn the devastation visited upon entire populations by civil war, economic strife, and man-made famine. As in the mid-1800's we may feel that we are locked in a cultural struggle for the very soul of America. The outcome is not certain, and the consequences are significant. Like Pastor Brooks, we might also be searching for signs

of relief and hope on this holy night as we join other pilgrims and by candlelight wander the streets of the town of Bethlehem.

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light.”

In the darkness of despair and hardship shines the light of hope and relief. Pastor Brooks saw the struggle between the dark and the light. Out of the darkness of national tragedy and professional crisis, the Reverend Brooks saw the hope for himself and for the world. The secret is that into our world of care and concern is born the light and the promise of the Christ Child. The everlasting light.

“So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.” On this Christmas Eve, earth and heaven are joined, and you and I can step out in faith and declare that God is good, and the will of this good God shall prevail.

We are familiar with the passage in Exodus where the Lord appears to Moses at the site of the burning bush. The Lord gives Moses the mission to go to Egypt and rescue the Israelites, whose suffering the Lord has heard. “Who shall I say has sent me?” Moses asks. And the Lord responds, “I am what I am.”

Because ancient Hebrew texts are often difficult to translate literally, another acceptable version is that the Lord says, “I will be who I will be.”

We might dare to go farther and say that the Lord might as well have chosen to say, “I am where I am” or “I am when I am.”

The Lord chose the baby Jesus on this Christmas Eve, in a stable, in a small town called Bethlehem, at a time that would lead to the changing of the world. In that stable, at that time on that Christmas Eve, our fate was sealed. We were destined to be changed forever.

It is our mission to live out that change. The everlasting light that shone in the streets of Bethlehem so many years ago must shine in us and through us today. We have kind and comforting words to say. Let us say them. We have acts of generosity to perform. Let us perform them. We have gifts to give and sacrifices to make. Let us do so. To our human hearts God has imparted the blessings of his heaven. God may be what, where, and when God chooses, and God has chosen us. We here on earth, now on Christmas Eve, are all that God has to bring heaven to earth.

“We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell. O come to us, abide with us, our lord Emmanuel.”

Amen.