

Pastor T.C. Arnold
Christmas Eve
Luke 2
December 24th, 2019

Phillips Brooks, an Episcopal Priest and Bishop, was born into a “semi”-distinguished family in Boston Massachusetts in 1835. He was an intellectual giant, graduating from Harvard University at the age of twenty. In fact if you visit “Harvard Yard” you will see the Phillips Brooks House which was built seven years after his death. He was also a physical giant, so to speak, as he stood 6’6” tall with a robust figure. Not only did he have a giant intellect and a giant figure, he also had a giant voice – often referred to as the “Prince in the Pulpit.” It is said that he was an imposing preacher of the Word of God. He preached harshly against slavery during the days of the civil war and even preached at Harvard at the death of President Abraham Lincoln. Brooks was so big, so huge, so esteemed in so many ways. Sounds like an imposing and intimidating figure.

Yet, he wasn’t. Though he never had children of his own, the children of the parish absolutely loved him and he loved them. It is said that he kept a supply of toys, dolls and other objects of interest for children in his study so that youngsters would be encouraged, with their parents, to stop and chat with him. You can almost imagine this large man with such a large and imposing voice sitting on the floor of his study sharing a fun time with a group of youngsters. In fact, so close were children to his heart, he composed a special Christmas carol for the children of his parish to sing at the annual Children’s Christmas program. Its inspiration came from a recent trip to the Holy Land where he worshipped at the Church of the Nativity – the presumed spot where Jesus was born. You have sung this Christmas carol. It’s called *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

His sudden death was mourned by everyone who knew him. There’s even a story of a five-year-old girl who was upset because she hadn’t seen her preacher friend for several days. When she was told by her mother that Brooks had gone to heaven, the child exclaimed, “Oh Mama, how happy the angels will be.”

And how happy the angels were to announce the birth of the King of Glory. “*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of heavenly hosts praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men.’*” Imagine this splendid announcement. The array of everything beautiful and glorious in the heavens while those receiving this message were frightened by the brilliant spectacle. An angelic display that must have seemed larger than life... praise and glory and songs and an announcement from heaven. The skies peeling back the darkness and giving way to a glorious light. And then the shepherd’s go to that little town and what do they see?

A baby. An ordinary baby. There’s Mary, and there is Joseph. Oh there are a few animals here and there but nothing as spectacular as that announcement in the field that made those shepherds so afraid that it hurt. What they saw must have seemed so ordinary compared to what they experienced out in the field. And they were right to be frightened. Very few have actually seen God and lived. We know how Moses was put in the cleft of a rock and the God only showed him His backside because His glory was too big for him. We are told that Jacob wrestled with God and that Isaiah saw a vision of God in Isaiah 6. But that was the very rare exception and not the rule.

But here are the Shepherd’s, traveling from the fields to Bethlehem, probably still shaking in their sandals, wondering what kind of King they will behold with their very eyes. What will He look like? Will He be the picture of God they may have formed in their minds eye... larger than life... the one who put Uzzah to death, who only tried to steady the ark of the covenant with his hand so that it

wouldn't fall... the one who judges the peoples harshly? Are you like the shepherds? Of what might you be afraid this Christmas?

Oh I know, this season lends itself to peace on earth and good will toward men. That's what the heavenly host sing. That's what you are told to "feel." But the truth is, the stress of Christmas and the New Year also weighs heavy on our shoulders. And what if peace eludes us this Christmas? There is no peace because of strained family relationships. Because there is unresolved conflict. Because we are frightened of what 2020 will bring for us and our families. Because we are stuck in behavior that is detrimental to us, and those around us. Because our relationship with our Lord is not what it should be. And there is no peace.

Beloved, it is not a bad thing to "fear" the Lord like those shepherds in the field watching their flocks. Sin and death consume the people of God in a fallen world. We struggle to survive and sometimes we slip and fall ourselves. God says not to. He says, stay on the straight and narrow way. Love for Him, but we haven't done that. We have selfishly indulged in pleasures that only hurt us and those we love. And God, even in all His righteous glory, says be afraid. The unrighteous will be judged.

Phillips Brooks was larger than life... a huge man with a huge voice and a huge intellect. Yet, he loved the smallest and most vulnerable the most. He even wrote Christmas carols for them. Similarly our God is larger than life, but would give His only begotten Son to be born of a virgin in the smallest of small towns... not even in an inn but among an audience of animals. Only our God could be so big and yet so small. Only our God could create the world and everything in it and then come as one of His very own creation. Only a God like ours would give us everything we have here on earth and then also provide a child, a man to die on the cross in order to give us everything that we will have in eternity in heaven with Him.

I know that we come to Christmas Eve Service because that's what we do on Christmas Eve. We come into God's presence to sing beautiful Christmas hymns and to listen to them as well. We come to see the glory and the splendor of a beautifully decorated church. We come to hear the choir sing to the newborn King. We come to experience the extraordinary.

But, beloved in the Lord, that's not how God came. He came in an ordinary way... very ordinary in fact. So ordinary it was lowly. So, this coming year, I hope that you will see God in the ordinary. His guiding presence with you during your ordinary day. His protection and His love in the same. His blessings sure come when you aren't even looking for them. Know God in the ordinary. Come and know Him in the ordinary way you worship Him each week right here. The ordinary means of grace He has chosen to deliver to you His life and salvation. The ordinary ole sermon that pastor preaches as you hear the law of God which draws our hearts to repentance and the Gospel which delivers Jesus forgiveness to you.

God is both big... larger than life... and very small... a child in a manger. But this is your God. He is all in all... for you. Nothing was more humble and beneath God than death at the hands of His own creation. But that is what God was born to do. And it's for you, beloved in the Lord. The Lord of Christmas and New Year's... and all of your life... be with you and abide with you always. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.