

“Searching for the Sacred”

(Christmas Eve 2009)

The words are familiar, lingering in the recesses of our memories and awoken the moment the phrase, “In those days a degree went out...” rides the airwaves and enters into our ears, hearts and souls. These words have been spoken by booming baritone voices and said in prayerful barely audible whispers. These words have been read nervously by children dressed in shepherd’s garb and adults standing before people on this very night. These words have been said in sanctuaries, living rooms, back rooms, outside, inside, across countries and across the centuries in countless languages and to countless people. These words were said by a cartoon character named Linus, who drags his trusty blue blanket to the middle of a stage, calls for the spotlight, and recites Luke’s words about shepherds abiding and afraid and then being filled with great joy all in response his friend Charlie who had wondered aloud if anyone knew the true meaning of Christmas. And these words, “In those days a degree went out...” have been spoken to you tonight.

Nestled in-between these words there are a variety of emotions. There is Joseph’s nervousness wanting things to go well, his concern for Mary and frustration as they constantly tried to make their way through the crowded Bethlehem streets seeking a place to stay. There is Mary’s weariness, her worry that labor would not wait for them to find a resting place and her thoughtful pondering in response to the shepherds. Then there are the shepherds who feel the lightheadedness coming not from too much eggnog, but from a powerful mixture of hope and fear awoken with the angel’s appearance. In the short span of twenty verses we encounter a vast variety of emotions. Perhaps this is why we can hear these familiar words year after year and still they sound different, they still feel different, but mostly because we are different.

We arrive at Christmas Eve 2009 after the last four, sometimes frenzied, weeks and hear how people two thousand years ago carried with them emotions like nervousness, fear, excitement, hope, love, joy and uncertainty of what to make of it all, some of the same emotions that are jostling around inside each of us tonight. We arrive at Christmas Eve 2009 after another year on an economic rollercoaster and too much focus on celebrity miscues. We carry in our hearts to the manger tonight concern for those we know who have lost jobs. We carry those who struggle with illnesses and those who face difficult decisions. Swirling around our minds are thoughts of family and friends, some of whom sit right next to us. Tonight we see children bubbling with excitement and we feel a smile cross our face. We sing carols to each other filling this space with sound and reverberating off the walls around us is the sacred truth of tonight. As the melodies escape our lips and we hear the person next to us singing the same words, even if not in the same key, it still sounds sweet. Friends, the same mixture of emotions that greeted Jesus on the first Christmas, from hope to anxiety, from fear to love all resonate in us who have gathered here on Christmas Eve 2009. And yet we arrive tonight with something more than trepidation for what we experience outside these walls, we arrive with a prayer that we might discover anew that moment which can settle our souls and help us make meaning of our lives. For, friends, like every character met in Luke’s gospel, we are all searching.

Searching is one of those great themes woven into those tiny words within the Christmas narrative. Mary and Joseph searched for a place where they can rest and where Jesus could be born. The innkeeper searched around an already overcrowded, overflowing house for a few feet of privacy for a couple with nervous, tired and longing eyes. The shepherds searched out the manger while adrenaline and curiosity coursed within. And we, too, come searching tonight.

There are some who know exactly what you are searching for, you are looking for that moment when Christmas hope and peace wash over you, love and joy well up within you; found perhaps in the tune of *Silent Night*. For others, you might not yet be able to put your finger on exactly why you are here. You might find yourself looking around for some sign that words like hope, peace, joy, and love which can feel so fragile this year in particular might be found in a tangible way tonight. Sometimes we find what we are searching for quickly and almost effortlessly. Other times we labor and minutes slip quickly past as we keep searching and searching. This happened several weeks ago to our family as we had misplaced a library book. We looked high and low, in backpacks, on bookshelves, in corners and closets, upstairs and downstairs, we thought we had exhausted every space of our home. Until, Gina remember that our minivan seats had been folded down the day the book was checked out, and low and behold what was once lost, was finally found.

Searching within the journey of faith takes time and patience and persistence, even when we know exactly what we are searching for and especially when we do not. And friends, just like Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the innkeeper, and the shepherds, we need not search alone.

Immersing ourselves in a community of searchers does not guarantee we will instantly find what we are looking for, but it does help keep and kindle the flames of hope, peace, love and joy when we feel the lights of those words flicker against the cold winter breezes. Immersing ourselves in a community of searchers does not release us from the responsibility of exploring for ourselves all that a five letter word like 'faith' or the invitation, "follow Jesus" might mean for us, but being in community of fellow searchers does add this indescribable sense of joy to my own exploring. The birth of God's light into our world echoes across the centuries with an invitation to search for the sacred here and now when we hear again the familiar words, "In those days a degree went out..."

Friends, the good news is those days are these days. That silent, holy night two thousand years ago is tonight. The words we heard and sang tonight beckon us into a life of searching and searching alongside others. It is my Christmas prayer that wherever you find yourself on your faith journey you will know that this is a place where when we step away from the stable, shake the straw from our feet, we keep searching for God's presence and light bursting into our world today. And that what helps moments of joy when laughter comes easy and in moments of grief when tears baptize our face is being in a community that keeps the lights of hope, peace, joy and love burning brightly. Searchers are welcome for at the very heart of our faith is an invitation to pay attention, to notice, and to share with others how God is moving in our midst in this very place at this time. Let us keep searching. Not only on this holy night, on this silent light, not only in a little town of Bethlehem where hark the herald angels sing and the first gleam of Christmas shines forth away in a manger, but let us keep searching for the sacred together, side by side throughout the weeks and year to come.

Thanks be to Emmanuel, God with us and God stirring in our lives, in our community and in our world. Merry Christmas to you all. And may the hope, peace, joy, and love of this night warm your hearts and light our paths throughout 2010. And let the people of God say, "Amen!"