



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
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## Betty Had a Problem

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock pm service, December 24, 2016  
Christmas Eve: The "Christ-mass"—Based on Isaiah 9 and Luke 2*

Betty had a problem! Children would laugh at her. When she reached adolescence, other teens would chide her, and by the time high school rolled around, they simply avoided her.

You see, Betty was born with a severe cleft palate.

Friends and neighbors wondered about her family, why they didn't seem to care about her condition. Then one day the story tumbled out. When Betty was only eight years old, her father, who was unemployed and covering his pain with heavy drinking, left his spouse and Betty.

Within the next 3 years, Betty's mother contracted terminal cancer. During the months and months of chemotherapy treatments, Betty tended to her mother. Then her condition got worse. Nearly six months into the mother's illness, near Christmas time, she had to be admitted to the hospital.

On a lonely Saturday night at Grady Memorial Hospital in downtown Atlanta, Betty sat in a dark corner room with her mother, wiping her head with cold wash cloths.

One of the chaplains, a Roman Catholic priest, walking through that hall, noticed a glimpse from the hall light. He noticed Betty and her mother.

As he walked in, he inquired if they would like to have a prayer. "That would be nice," said Betty. There in the dimly lit room, they commended their lives to the mercy and care of God. After the prayer, the priest looked at Betty and said, "As I was moving past your room, you caught my eye; I looked in this room and I saw your face."

Before he could continue, Betty, looking down at her feet, said, "I know, I have a severe cleft palate, and we haven't had the money to repair it and provide for me the plastic surgery required."

The priest quickly chimed in, "Oh, oh, oh no," he said, "I didn't notice your mouth and nose ... as I walked past your door, I saw the bedside lamp illuminate around your head, and I was taken by your acts of mercy—wiping your mother's brow—and I was drawn to come in ... In fact, I thought I saw the face of an angel."

The message of this night acknowledges both the dark places of living and the brightness of God's presence among us. In fact, darkness is probably the most vivid metaphors for human misery—for despair—for the absence of joy. It's a symbol which we understand because the world is full of dark places.

The darkness that was present on that first Christmas was the fears of some shepherds, the anxiety of a young man engaged to be married, a harassed innkeeper, and an insecure king.

Darkness hasn't changed much over the years. Betty realized it in the hospital room, and those same manifestations of darkness walked through these doors tonight, sat down in these chairs, and climbed into this pulpit.

Isaiah spoke of the darkness, but it was not a word of despair. It was a word of heart-bursting joy, because he spoke of the defeat of darkness: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has the light shined."

The message of this Holy Night acknowledges three great themes:

First, darkness is very real! Betty knew it. We all know it.

Darkness is not just cosmic and earth-shaking; it's also extremely personal. Some here tonight have lost their way, and some have lost someone near and dear, and grief hits hard. Some others know first-hand the excruciating pain of loneliness, while others are merely existing, going through the motions.

Let me ask you:

- + Is there anyone here tonight who feels they have lost their way?
- + Is there anyone who is struck tonight by the darkness of grief and loss ...  
Or doubt and uncertainty?

Secondly, Christ illuminates the darkness with the light of God's presence. Do you remember as a child being caught in a room full of darkness and you couldn't find the light? Do you remember the overwhelming angst? And then a parent or an older sibling came in and turned on the light? Suddenly you became relaxed, you realized that you weren't alone.

Christmas is about God entering into our dark places and illuminating life with love and mercy. Christ doesn't take away the darkness, but illuminates it ... so that we can take one step at a time out of the dark place.

And, third, no event, no circumstance, no amount of evil, no matter how dark it may seem, can ever extinguish the light and love of Christ.

The light of God was born in Bethlehem, and beginning with King Herod and going all the way to Calvary, there was a litany of people who tried to put out God's light. But not even the cross of Christ could squelch God's presence.

There were people who tried to squelch the light of God in Wallace Purling. Wallace grew up in the Midwest. He was bigger than other boys his age, and he had a sweet, kind disposition, and he was generous to everyone. But Wallace was also the slowest in his class academically. While he was kind to everyone, not everyone was kind back. Other children chided Wallace for his slowness. When Wallace was nine and in the second grade, he was scheduled by then to be in the fourth grade. Most people in town knew that he had difficulty in keeping up. He was awkward and uncoordinated in sports, and he couldn't hold a tune in the glee club.

Wallace fancied the idea of being a shepherd with a flute in the Christmas pageant that year, but the play's director assigned him the role of the innkeeper, because of his size and there weren't many lines. In the practices leading up to the big night, the director had to school Wallace in being stern, to say his lines past Mary and Joseph and to say them with harshness. Wallace had a difficult time with the role because "harshness" just wasn't in his bones, or in his heart. But he gave his best.

When the big night came, the pageant was going along fine. Joseph appeared, slowly, tenderly guiding Mary to the door of the inn. Joseph knocked hard. Wallace, the innkeeper, came to the front: "What do you want?" Wallace said, swinging the door open with a brusque gesture.

"We seek lodging."

"Seek it elsewhere," Wallace said in his most dramatic and harsh manner.

"The inn is full; there is no room for you." Wallace was trying to look appropriately stern.

"Please, please good innkeeper, this is my wife, Mary, and she is great with child ... she desperately needs rest and protection. We are so tired."

Now, for the first time, Wallace the innkeeper was beginning to shift in his stance ... While he wasn't supposed to make eye contact, he looked down at Mary. And with that there was a long pause. Then a whisper from the wings could be heard—to prompt Wallace—"No, begone!"

"No!" Wallace repeated automatically. "Begone!"

With that, Joseph and Mary forlornly turned and began walking away into the darkness. But Wallace didn't return to the inside of the inn, which were his instructions. He kept staring at the couple. His lip began to quiver and tears came to his eyes; his brow became creased.

And then he blurted it out: "WAIT! DON'T GO; BRING MARY BACK." And Wallace's face grew into a bright smile: "You can have my room!"

Some people in town thought the pageant had been ruined. Yet most thought it was the best presentation they had ever seen in their town.

Many years after Betty's mother had died, Betty was attending a conference at the Episcopal Conference Center called Kanuga. And during a particular seminar someone asked her, "When did God's love become real in your life? ... When did the love of Christ cease to be merely an idea or a theory, and become authentic? ... When did you experience in a palpable, tangible way the love and grace of Christ?"

Betty said: "It was the night that a Roman Catholic priest looked into my face and didn't see a cleft palate, but saw in my life a light that was shining in the darkness—that light of God has never gone out."

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