



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

The Right Reverend Dean Elliott Wolfe, D.D., Rector

Surprised

Sermon preached at the seven o'clock service, December 24, 2020

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

May the light of the Christ child illumine this night...

and all our lives...

with God's celestial brightness.

Amen.

It always surprises me, this night. It always does. I wait for it and I wait for it; I long for it, even. And then it's finally here, and it astonishes me all over again like it's the very first time.

- I think I'm surprised that, after all of these years, I am still so moved by the mystery.
- I think I'm surprised by the memories this night evokes and the power they hold.
 - Memories of my mother and my father on this night, and even my grandparents, gone now, long ago.
 - Memories of beloved cousins, aunts and uncles, and all the family gathered round together.
- I am also surprised, after all these years, by the feelings of longing—a child's longing, really—for that joy and that happiness and for that hope I remember. Oh, that indescribable hope! Out of even the slightest wisp of faith, a child can craft a hope that possesses all the strength of titanium.

Why does that become so difficult for adults?

The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger."

Larry Libby described it beautifully when he wrote, "Late on a sleepy, star-spangled night, those angels peeled back the sky just like you would tear open a sparkling Christmas present. Then, with light and joy pouring out of Heaven like water through a broken dam, they began to shout and sing the message that baby Jesus had been born. The world had a Savior! The angels called it 'Good News,' and it was."ⁱ

And it is. It *is* Good News! And sometime tonight, I'll go outside and look up into the night sky to try to imagine the night when it all came to pass. I'll try to remember the night when an unspeakably divine light

came into a dark and frightened world in the form of an infant, a mere child. And nothing was ever the same again.

C.S. Lewis titled his spiritual autobiography, *Surprised by Joy*, a title that distills to its essence the experience of Christian faith. Christians are, truly, surprised by the joy. We don't really expect it. We know we haven't earned it. It simply comes to us, like some astonishing gift you never imagined would ever come to you.

This Christmas I need not try to explain to you why we are so desperately seeking to be "surprised by joy." There is no need to be reminded of the more than 310,000 lives lost to COVID-19 in our nation alone—now some 3,000 a day! A number of deaths too large to fully comprehend. And there is no need to be reminded of the countless other lives turned inside-out by the economic catastrophe related to the pandemic. We already know. We already know.

And, by now, some of us have our own personal stories to tell of loved ones lost too soon or stories of careers and businesses left in shambles. And, too, there are the smaller losses that disorient us and pull us farther away from one another: all the trips not taken, the people not hugged, the holidays missed, and the children and grandchildren not visited. No, no one needs to be convinced about the need for hope or joy this Christmas.

There's an old Christmas story about a professor whose 5-year-old son was working on an art project in his kindergarten class. The creation was made of plaster, and to the casual observer it resembled not much in particular. Still, with a little paint and some sparkle and some time in a kiln, it was ready to be wrapped as a gift. It had taken the boy nearly three months to complete. He had wrapped it himself, and he was beside himself with excitement. It would be a gift for his father at Christmas.

Early in December, when the child could hardly contain the secret, the last day of school finally came. All the parents arrived for the big Christmas play, and when the students left for home, they were finally allowed to take their ceramic presents with them.

The boy secured his gift, ran toward his parents, and then, in his excitement, tripped and fell to the floor. The gift became airborne, and, when it landed on that cafeteria floor, the shattering sound it made stopped every conversation in the room. It was perfectly quiet for a moment, and everyone who heard it or saw it considered the magnitude of the loss. For a 5-year-old boy, there had never been a more valuable gift in the whole of creation. It could never be replaced.

The boy crumpled to the floor next to his broken gift and began to cry. Both parents rushed to their son, but the father was uncomfortable with the moment. People were watching. His son was crying. He patted the boy on the head and tried to be reassuring. "Son, it's OK; it doesn't matter. It really doesn't matter."

His wife glared at him. "Oh yes, it matters," she said to her son and to her husband. "Oh yes it does matter." She cradled her son in her arms, rocking him back and forth, and cried with him. After a few minutes, the boy's crying ceased. "Now," said the mother, "let's go home and see what we can do with what's left." And so, with a mother's magic and a sturdy glue gun, they put together, from all the broken pieces, a multi-colored butterfly. And, amazingly, the artwork after the accident may actually have been more beautiful than it was in its "pre-broken" state.

At Christmas, the gift was finally formally presented to the father, and, as long as he lived, the professor always kept that butterfly on his desk. It was a constant reminder to him that grief is real, and that loss hurts. Sometimes you just have to sit and cry. It was also a reminder that even from the greatest losses, great beauty can eventually emerge.ⁱⁱ

We may not be able yet to fully see the beauty that is to come. But we know that even while shattering loss and grief are very real, they are not the end of the story—our story—and we know that precisely because of the birth of this child and the promise he brings. It is the promise of deliverance and salvation and a hope so bright no long winter's night can eclipse it.

Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

Madeleine L'Engle writes in her Christmas poem, "The Risk of Birth":

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour & truth were trampled by scorn —
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.
When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn —
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.ⁱⁱⁱ

This is no time for a child to be born, but Love has taken the risk of birth. The Infinite has taken on the risk of being merely finite, the divine has taken on the risk of being merely human, and the miracle of this incarnational surprise continues to reveal itself. And this "surprise" continues to change us and to transform us.

As that wonderful theologian Frederick Buechner observes, "It is impossible to conceive how different things would have turned out if that birth had not happened whenever, wherever, however it did ... for millions of people who have lived since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life... but a new way of living it. It is a truth that, for twenty centuries, there have been untold numbers of men and women who, in untold numbers of ways, have been so grasped by the child who was born, so caught up in the message he taught and the life he lived, that they have found themselves profoundly changed by their relationship with him."^{iv}

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined...

The light that shines upon us changes us. It changes our past. It changes our present. It changes our future. We are being transformed by it every single moment of every single day of our lives. And that, too, of course, is the challenge of this moment: to embrace our transformations and to live into the possibilities of a life with the loving presence of the Son of God leading it. There is serious work here to be done.

Theologian and Minister Howard Thurman was a key influence on the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. when King was a student at Boston University's School of Theology and he was serving as its first African-American Dean. He wrote,

When the song of the angels is stilled,

when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all peoples,
to make a little music with the heart.^v

Then the work of Christmas begins. We must begin the work of this Christmas! To find the lost; to seek out all those who have begun to lose hope. To heal those broken in spirit so they might rise from the ashes to live lives of meaning and purpose. To feed the hungry—not only those who are physically hungry, but those who are spiritually hungry as well. To release the oppressed, because in freeing them, we will free ourselves. To rebuild the nations, because the nations so clearly need to be rebuilt. To bring peace among all peoples, because we are tearing ourselves apart.

This, truly, this is what it is to be surprised by the joy. It always surprises me, this night. It always does. I wait for it, and I wait for it. I long for it, even, and then it's finally here and it surprises me. It astonishes me all over again, like it's the very first time.

AMEN

ⁱ Larry Libby & Steve Halladay, *Wonderful Counselor: A Fortnight of Christmas Meditations*, Doubleday Religious Publishing Group, c. 2000

ⁱⁱ Christmas Stories of the Heart, edited by Alice Gray, Walker Publishing, 1999

ⁱⁱⁱ Madeleine L'Engle, "The Risk of Birth, Christmas, 1973," from *The Ordering of Love: New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L'Engle*, Crown Publishing, 2009

^{iv} Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus; A Life Story*, Riverwood Publishing, c. 1974

^v Howard Thurman, *The Mood of Christmas & Other Celebrations*, Friends United Press, 1985