



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Imagine a Night

Sermon preached at the seven o'clock service, December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Come, Holy Spirit, and kindle the fire that is in us.

Take our lips and speak through them.

Take our hearts and see through them.

Take our souls and set them on fire. Amen

So, here it is. Finally. Christmas, at the end of a really hard year for most of us. Well nearly two hard years, actually. Nearly two years of pandemic dislocation. Nearly two years of fear and isolation. Nearly two years of long lines for vaccinations and tests. Nearly two years of cancelled trips and postponed family gatherings. And nearly two years of a growing death toll that now surpasses 800,000 lives lost to Covid in the United States since the pandemic began. The number is actually too large to comprehend. It can only shock us, but in accomplishing that feat, the number does its duty by reminding us of the sheer magnitude of our losses.

It is into this world, into this moment, that the Christ child is born once again. So imagine a night as clear as a bell in a world as cold as iron. Imagine a night when the world was as exhausted and as shattered as it is tonight. Imagine a night when the people of the earth were blinded by the darkness and searching frantically for a greater light. Imagine a night when the sky became a twinkling, glittering invitation into this great mystery, a night when *anything* might be possible, and *everything* might finally be made whole and right and good again.

The events of this night make us stretch our imaginations. They force us to think bigger. Much bigger. Bigger than small deeds and minor miracles. Bigger than worn traditions or saccharine sentimentality. We need to try to imagine the collision of heaven and earth! We need to imagine shepherds and angels in conversation. We need to imagine a human flesh-and-blood child who is the very Son of God, born to a woman and a man in the humblest of situations. It's a lot to wrap one's mind around in a single evening.

The main event of this night takes place in Bethlehem, an out-of-the-way village, 6 miles south of the capitol city of Jerusalem. Now Bethlehem may have been King David's home town, but there wasn't much else to distinguish it. Still, it did have lots of caves for stabling animals on a cold night. It did have a place where a couple expecting a child might find a safe place to sleep, if there were no room for them in the inn.

And so, when the Christ child was born, they laid him in a manger—a hay stand used to feed the animals. So this, this is how God's son enters our world!?! And who are the first witnesses to this holy event? A group of regular working guys, shepherds tending their flocks in the fields by night.

Now I grew up in Southern Ohio in that Appalachian band of the country which stretches from Mississippi and Alabama in the south and follows the Appalachian Mountains all the way north into New York. Dolly Parton's music is popular in that part of the country. Now I know some of you are thinking, "Dolly Parton in a Park Avenue Christmas sermon?" But I remember hearing her sing this bittersweet song about a "Hard Candy Christmas," where money is tight, relationships are estranged, and the difference between the romantic Christmas *dream* and the harsh Christmas *reality* is as heartbreaking as any country song you know.

She sings,
Hey, maybe I'll learn to sew
Maybe I'll just lie low
Maybe I'll hit the bars
Maybe I'll count the stars until dawn

Me, I will go on
Maybe I'll settle down
Maybe I'll just leave town
Maybe I'll have some fun
Maybe I'll meet someone and make him mine.

Me, I'll be just
Fine and dandy
Lord, it's like a hard candy Christmas
I'm barely getting through tomorrow
but still, I won't let sorrow
bring me... way down.ⁱ

A large part of the Good News we celebrate this night is that even if you're "barely getting through tomorrow," God is with you. And, if we're being completely honest here, some of us *are* barely getting through, and that's okay, that's okay.

We often say that Christmas is a terrible time to be alone or a terrible time to endure a tragedy or a family illness. But perhaps we have that wrong. Because the central message of this night is that we are not alone. We aren't alone. Not in our grief. Not in our joblessness. Not in our inability to have the relationships we want. Not in our illnesses. Not in our fears. Not in anything we experience. God walks with us. *Emanuel* means, literally, "God with us." And if we don't understand this, if we don't quite get this, perhaps we are not yet in deep enough need.

It was that saintly advocate for the poor, Archbishop Oscar Romero who once observed, "No one can celebrate a genuine Christmas without being truly poor. The self-sufficient, the proud, those who, because they have everything, look down on others, those who have no need, even of God.... for them there will be no Christmas. Only the poor, the hungry, those who need someone to come on their behalf, will have that someone. That someone is God. Emanuel. God-with-us. Without poverty of spirit, there can be no abundance of God."ⁱⁱ Even the richest among us knows a little something about poverty of spirit this year. And there are people who, with God's help, are making their way through.

Maybe you've heard the story of Jackie Turner? While all her classmates were eagerly making plans with family and friends for their trips back home for the holidays, Jackie Turner, a junior at William Jessup University near Sacramento, was worried she would be the only student left on campus for Christmas. "This time of year is hard," Jackie said. "Everyone is talking about their cousins, their families, all the things that make up Christmas." But Jackie says she doesn't have any of that, and she never did

She told the interviewer for CBS news that her childhood was abusive, and she never shared in any of the Christmas experiences she heard her classmates talk about.

Instead of feeling sorry for herself, the straight A-student posted an ad on Craigslist, offering \$8 an hour to rent parents for the holidays. “Maybe for like a couple hours,” she said, “just be, like, the light of their life for that moment.”

She got dozens of responses to her ad: about half from parents who wanted to help—for free of course—and about half from other young people who felt the same way she did. So she held a meet-up Christmas potluck dinner. “People are hurting and broken and we need each other,” Jackie said. “We need to be loving people. And I think that’s what tonight’s about.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Oh, Jackie, that is *precisely* what this night is about! That we were loved by God so much that God sent God’s only Son. And all that is asked of us in return is that we love one another as God loves us. It turns out, “Jackie not only found a mentor for herself that holiday season, but she matched the needy with the needed. She continues to host yearly meet-ups with a potluck Christmas dinner, because no one should ever feel alone on Christmas.”^{iv}

We need to be loving people. And I think that’s what tonight’s about.

The story we tell on this night confirms we were not arbitrarily placed on the planet and flung through the galaxies to fend for ourselves, alone. This story reminds us that God came to us and took human form to be with us. This story tells us that God came to us in infinite power and might and then took on the form of a tiny infant, the most vulnerable and fragile vessel imaginable, so that we might comprehend something of God’s tenderness and vulnerability.

This story tells us that God came to us in human form as an infant to remind us that great power comes to us in forms that usually surprise us. Which also means that WE possess great power in forms which might surprise us as well.

Goliath wasn’t scared of David and his little slingshot. But he should have been. The people of Jericho weren’t afraid of the Israelites marching round and round their walled city! They should have been. Jesus often appears powerless in the gospels. The meek and mild infant grows up to be a man, and he is anything but powerless. It isn’t physical strength or political or military power, but the power of God, and it remains unrivaled.

We don’t always recognize the power our one voice has in the world. We don’t appreciate the power of our own individual actions, our own personal decisions to pursue truth or honor or kindness or character or justice. In Christ, God reminds us of the power of every person who appears to be powerless.

So, imagine a night as clear as a bell in a world as cold as iron. Imagine a night when the world was just as exhausted and just as shattered as it is tonight. Imagine a night when the people of the earth were blinded by the darkness, and searching for a greater light. Imagine a night when the sky became a twinkling, glittering invitation into this great mystery, a night when anything might be possible, and everything might finally be made whole and right and good again.

That is *this* night.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;

authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Amen.

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ⁱ Carol Grisham Hall, Songwriter, "Hard Candy Christmas" lyrics © Universal Music Corp., Otay Music Corp., Daniel Music Ltd.
Source: *Musixmatch*, accessed December 22, 2021

ⁱⁱ Archbishop Oscar Romero, "A Question of Values on the Eve of Christmas," *The Seattle Times*, December 24, 2004, accessed December 14, 2021

ⁱⁱⁱ Steve Hartman, *CBS Evening News*, December 20, 2013, accessed December 14, 2021

^{iv} *Ibid.*