

“MEN AND WOMEN OF GRAY BLANKETS”

December 27, 2009

The First Sunday after Christmas

Text: John 1: 1-18, “The Light Shines in the
Darkness”

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John’s Prologue from the first chapter of his Gospel, an annual lection during Christmastide for the Church, enshrines the beautiful words, “In Him was life and the life was the light of all people; the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” These words remind us that Christ is in the whole of life, not just the joy but also the sorrow and pain.

Here we are now on the other side of Christmas, with the feeling that it has come and gone. It is something we have done, and the temptation, for many of us, is that there is a sense of relief that it is over, and also maybe, a bit of let-down that nothing more has come about in our lives because of it.

But on this side of Christmas, we can hold onto the wonder of it all.

And the awesome power of Christmas is not just about the light, beautiful as it is—but also about the darkness. It is for a reason that the first week of Christmas also marks the Feast Day of the Holy Innocents, the children slaughtered by Herod when the tyrant tried to find Jesus and kill him because the child Jesus was a threat to him.

Today, tyrants continue to kill children and all who threaten them. On Christmas day we witnessed another attempted, but thank goodness, thwarted, terrorist attack on flight 253 coming from Nigeria, Amsterdam, to Detroit.

And, yet, the light still shines; as the New York Times reported this morning, in spite of billions of dollars in sophisticated technology and equipment,

how was the terrorist attack averted? Or, should we say the word, “Who?” When fire and noise arose from the plane, courage and ordinary human diligence did what the national security state did not—and did overcome evil with love—not as sentiment but power in the force of good.

That is what Christmas is, and will always be, beneath so much of the genuine beauty and sometimes false sentiment, the promise of light in the darkness yes—but also the promise of the power of love to overcome evil.

And what if the bomb had exploded? What if the darkness enveloped the plane? And our nation once again? What if the terrorist plot had succeeded? And what if those passengers suffered the fate of the brave over the fields of PA as Flight 93 on September 11?

Does Christianity promise merely the light of victory or prosperity? Or does it promise something deeper, more abiding, the faithful power of the cause of truth? Are not light, joy and resurrection sometimes apart from the victories and successes known by our world.

Two great Civil War poets wrote the following in the mist of crushing carnage that demonstrated that always proves God’s judgment stands over any human pretension:

William Cullen Bryant:

Truth, crushed to earth, will raise
again.”

James Russell Lowell:

Truth forever on the scaffold,
Wrong Forever on the throne.

Yet that scaffold sways the future.

Behind the dim unknown stands God
Within the shadow keeping watch
above his own.

The universe hinges on moral foundations, on the light; in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. “no lie can live forever.”

We might summarize the Johannine prologue in Dr. King's words, "The arch of the universe always bends to truth and justice; the body they may kill but God's truth abideth still."

The spectrum of the cross is all over the manger and that is the good news for this day after Christmas as we return to the world's light and darkness.

The great Anglican poet John Donne writes,

"The whole life of Christ was a continual passion. Others die Martyrs, but Christ was born a martyr. He found a Golgotha, where he was crucified, even in Bethlehem, where he was born; for to his tenderness, then the straws were almost as sharp as thrones after--and the manger as uneasy as the cross at last. His birth and death were but one continual act, and his Christmas day and his Good Friday are but one evening and morning of the same day. And, as even his birth, is his death, so every action and passage that manifests Christ to us is his birth."

Every action that manifests Christ to us is his birth. Every action that brings light into the Darkness of the world, manifests the birth of Christ anew. And, yes sometimes there are the small victories-in Gray

A story appeared on Christmas Day in the New York Times several years ago as the Times annual Christmas Op Ed narrative.

"As folks were coming to the service, they noticed a man with a Gray blanket slumped in the back of the Pew. He had arrived early that morning. He just feel asleep there. Everyone presumed he was one of the countless homeless folk that came in and out of the church services on a typical Sunday. On this particular Sunday, it seems many of the parishioners were feeling a special

burst of Christmas joy. They lovingly placed some bills on the blanket of the man without waking him up. Actually, that gray blanket was a gift too. Someone had given it to him as relief from the cold.

"After the service, the minister of the church went to the back of the church to awaken the man. The snoring man raised his head and looked vacantly at the minister. He quickly got up and the bills fell to the floor.

"The minister looked with surprise and relief in the face of Chris Gregory, a fireman and paramedic he had known for years. "Gee, Pastor John, I'm sorry, said Chris."

"He told his story. He department had received three calls for fires. He had been out all night. The last call included a call to a girl who was about to give birth. She was one of those who had sought the warmth of a fire which had gotten out of hand in a dilapidated tenement. Before she could be taken to the hospital, the delivered a baby boy. Just like Mary two thousand years before, she delivered her baby out in the coldness of the night, as the fires of the world burned all around."

"Chris went to the hospital and spent more time there than he expected. It had been a long night, and he stopped to make at least one Christmas service—feeling rather discouraged and defeated. What would that woman do for Christmas gifts or anything for her child? She had nothing. Not even a blanket."

"But, as the pastor and the fire-fighter counted those bills left in mistaken love for a homeless man, they counted almost 2,000!"

"So, they both travelled to the hospital to give something akin to the Magi's gifts, or the Shepherd's adoration—for 2,000 and a nice gray blanket would be some light of hope

to a newly homeless woman—and her son.”

“As Chris told the pastor, “fold up that blanket quickly—I don’t think the parishioners want to know who the man in the gray blanket really was!”

“They never knew the identity of that homeless man—and, after the hospital visit, neither the pastor John or Chris would know what became of the woman—for she soon disappeared again and they could not locate her.”

And yet, perhaps, within the dim shadow, stand One keeping watch upon his own.

Yes, the in the words of the great spiritual writer and poet Howard Thurman in his great poem, the Real Work of Christmas:

“When the song of the Angels is stilled,

When the star in the sky is gone,

When Kings and Princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flocks,

The real work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,

To heal the broken,

To feed the hungry,

To release the Prisoner,

To rebuild the nations,

To bring peace among brothers,

To make the music in the heart...

...For every action which brings light into the world, victory or no, manifests Christ to us in his birth...

..As men and women with Gray Jackets—or planes suddenly filled with fire and smoke...

Amen...