

The Reverend Dr. Randall K. Bush
December 24, 2009, 11:00 pm Candlelight Service
Luke 2:8-14
“A Light in the Darkness”

It had to happen, I guess. Whether it's because I'm getting older or because I've got kids or I'm going senile, it's started to happen. I tear up now when I watch certain old movies. My daughter was sick recently, so we were watching a movie together – one that she loves called *Secondhand Lions*. It's a great film starring Michael Caine and Robert Duvall. Although I'd seen it a dozen times, at one point in the film I got choked up, my eyes started to tear, and I was digging out my handkerchief to blow my nose. Later the same thing happened when we watched *Finding Nemo*. Even animated fish can get me choked up now. As Charlie Brown would say, “Good grief!”

We may laugh off these tears with excuses about how we're just old softies, or blame them on feeling tired or stressed or too much rum in the eggnog. But in truth, we get weepy at classic films because we've seen enough in life to know that there's truth in the flickering movie images. There are islands of misfit toys, Grinches and Scrooges in the world. There are runs on banks and people who jump into icy rivers, wishing they'd never been born; and times when no amount of letters written makes miracles happen on 34th Street. But that's not all that makes us weepy. We weep because despite all of that gloom and doom, there are George Baileys and transformed Ebenezer Scrooges in the world, and angels still get their wings every time a bell rings; and deep down inside we believe that this world is good and trustworthy and wonderful after all.

There is something quite precious at the heart of Christmas. See, you can rail against the commercialism of Christmas, tilting at windmills and Wal-Mart displays all you wish, but behind all the tinsel and trappings is an attempt to express something that is exactly what it says it is: *Good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people*. It's something that becomes visible whenever Linus steps onto a darkened stage and asks for a spotlight, whenever Scrooge comes out from beneath his rumped bedsheets after the last ghost has gone, whenever George Bailey is given back his life, and a hundred other classic movie moments that still tear us up after dozens of viewings.

Good tidings of great joy which shall be to all people. What does that really mean? In order to answer that question, think about this one first: Why isn't Christmas Eve more like Easter? Easter is wonderful too. It's about Jesus' resurrection, and good news discovered at daybreak which the disciples then proclaimed to the world. It's a holiday of light and life and loud “alleluias.” Yet Christmas Eve is different. It's always depicted at nighttime, something that happened once upon a midnight clear. It's an event of shadows and starry skies and a manger bed in a stable. So why isn't the birth of Christ a time for bright lights and fireworks? Why is it always a “Silent Night” holiday?

Consider this for a moment. God's image has been given to us; God's spirit has been given to us; yet even with God's law and the scriptures and the wonder of all life around us, we remain a people who dwell in deep darkness. We are in this world, yet we are too much of this world and of this world's darkness.

I was reading a book review about someone's memoir about her struggles with depression and suicide attempts. The author said this: "If you live in the dark a long time and the sun comes out, you do not cross into [the light] whistling."¹ It's true – we are creatures who, when moving from darkness into light, often do so haltingly, blind and groping and struggling to get our bearings. We don't move from dark to light whistling. That's true physically and spiritually.

God knows how long we've each dwelt in darkness. God knows the shadows and fears, the brokenness and trouble that mark our days. God also knows that shining a bright light onto our reality would only blind us, would only cause us to blink and stumble or bury our heads once more under the bed sheets. Which is why Christmas is not like Easter. Into our world of darkness God has come – our world of lost jobs and household debt; tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, hospital stays, court appearances and empty-nest houses. Wherever the shadows are deepest in life, there is our Bethlehem. It is there as we dwell in deep darkness, that the angels come to us, saying "Fear not, for behold I bring unto you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord."

God has come to us. It is an act that has been described in scripture a hundred ways – God in Christ, the One who calms our storms, who heals our blind eyes, who embraces us as prodigals welcomed home at last; One who is vulnerable enough to let us hold the Most High God as an infant, while angels sing "O come let us adore him, Christ the Lord."

Movies may tug at our heartstrings and move us emotionally. But God in Christ literally grabs our souls and spirits and gives us life in abundance. And knowing how long we've lived in the shadows, God emerges slowly out of darkness to gently lead us into the light. So Christ was born at night – at our Bethlehem – so that even this miraculous incarnation would not cause us to blink or shudder or feel afraid. Good tidings of great joy, which shall be for you and for all people. It's enough to move you to tears.

AMEN

¹ Mary Karr, *Lit*, reviewed in the New York Times Book Review, November 15, 2009, p. 12.