

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**
Preached by the Rev. Timothy E. Schenck on December 29, 2019 (Christmas 1, Year A)

In 1865, Phillips Brooks, the future world-renowned preacher and rector of Trinity Church in Copley Square — the one who built that magnificent church — spent Christmas Eve in Bethlehem. At the time, Brooks was the 30-year-old rector of a church in Philadelphia, and I honestly have no idea how he managed to get Christmas off.

But however that played out, Brooks sent a letter home about this profoundly moving experience writing, “After an early dinner, we took our horses and rode to Bethlehem...Before dark, we rode out of town to the field where they say the shepherds saw the star...As we passed, the shepherds were still keeping watch over their flocks or leading them home to the fold.”

Then he wrote about attending the Christmas Eve service at the Church of the Nativity, which was built upon the site traditionally considered to be the birthplace of Jesus. While his overall experience in Bethlehem was inspiring, Brooks evidently wasn’t thrilled with the service itself. The liturgy, he wrote, “began about ten o’clock and lasted until three. It was the old story of a Romish service, with all its mummery, and tired us out.”

I’m sharing all this because it was the experience of spending Christmas in the Holy Land — minus all the “mummery” — that compelled Brooks to write the well known and loved Christmas carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. You can just picture him on horseback in those fields as we sing “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie. Above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent stars go by.”

He wrote the carol a few years after his trip for his Sunday School, and it was sung for the first time on Christmas Eve in 1868. The story goes that several days before Christmas he handed the text to his organist, Lewis Radner, and asked him to set it to music. Which is how the hymn came to be. And I’m aware that if I ever handed a hymn text to Buffy a few days before Christmas and told her to write music for it, I’d probably never even make it to Christmas Eve.

But I love the fact that the organist, reflecting years later, admitted that, “Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868.”

Because the same could easily be said about that night over 2,000 years ago when an unwed teenaged mother gave birth in a stable. No one could possibly have imagined the improbability that this birth would be remembered. Yes, all those angels shouting “Hosanna!” may have been a clue. But, still. Who really could have imagined the impact of this child’s birth? Jesus was just one of many children born that night around the world.

Like many Christians, I’ve been thinking about that little town of Bethlehem over the past week. But today we can think about the particularity of that town on that specific night in the context of God’s universal love for the entire world.

On Christmas Eve, we zoomed in with a tight shot of the manger. Luke's gospel brought us right into Bethlehem, into the heart of the nativity scene, complete with swaddling clothes and tidings of great joy and shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. We saw close-ups of Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. Being in that place and walking upon that sacred ground must have been much of what inspired Phillips Brooks on that night in Bethlehem.

But on this first Sunday after Christmas we zoom out. The poetic prologue of John's gospel gives us the wide-angle view to parallel the intricate detail of Luke. The particulars of Christ's incarnation are placed into their cosmic context.

And so, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God." It is precisely this Word that came into the world in human form in the person of Jesus Christ. The eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. And this took place in a stable in Bethlehem.

But zooming out to take a broader view of the incarnation doesn't make it any less real or any less intimate. In fact it highlights the power of what took place in Bethlehem. So ironically, perhaps, zooming out draws us in.

Because the incarnation, God entering the world in human form, means God's relationship with humanity has forever been changed. God through Jesus Christ is intimately involved in the details of our lives. Which means that we pray to a God who is not remote or distant, but one who is intimately connected to us. A God who understands the complexity of being human because he was, for a brief time, himself human.

So zooming out doesn't mean zooming away. We need both the close-up of Luke and the cosmological vista of John. In concert they give us a glimpse of the full Christmas story: the particularity of a stable with the universality of God's eternal Word. We can sing about a little town in Bethlehem even as we revel in the light that shines in the darkness.

And maybe that's where the inspiration came to write, "Yet in thy dark streets shineth, the everlasting Light. The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight."

You know, we do have a connection to Phillips Brooks here at St. John's. His relationship to Trinity Church is well known, but you may not know that for a brief time he served as the Bishop of Massachusetts — only for the last 15 months of his life. But in that capacity he visited St. John's in 1892. The parish was just a small wooden church at that time, located across the street, and had been open for less than a decade. But in our chapel stands the small wooden altar from the original church — an altar we use each week at our Wednesday service. And at that very altar the author of *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, a larger than life figure in so many ways — not the least being that he stood six and a half feet tall — celebrated the eucharist.

And in a few moments we will sing these beautiful words that so poignantly capture this holy season: "O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray; cast out our sin, and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; Oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!"