

Why we are here

Luke 2: 1-14

I love this poem by Phillip Brooks which begins like this:

*Everywhere, everywhere,
Christmas tonight! Christmas
in lands of the fir tree and pine,
Christmas in lands of the palm
tree and vine; Christmas where
snow-peaks stand solemn and
white, Christmas where corn-
fields lie sunny and bright;
Everywhere, everywhere,
Christmas tonight.*

*For the Christ-child who comes
is the Master of all, no place
too great and no cottage too
small. The Angels who
welcome Him sing from the
height, "In the city of David, a
King in His might."
Everywhere, everywhere,
Christmas tonight.*

*Then let every heart keep its
Christmas within Christ's pity
for sorrow, Christ's hatred for
sin. Christ's care for the
weakest, Christ's courage for
right, Christ's dread of the
darkness, Christ's love of the
light. Everywhere, everywhere,
Christmas tonight.*

Christmas tonight!
Maybe you feel it maybe you
don't. Sure, Christmas is not
here yet, but it's quite possible
that those of us who come to
this service are not feeling it.
And, in just a few weeks,
people all over the world will
be drawn to the still beautiful
cathedrals and churches, the
peaceful places where God's
love is spoken, and the little
chapels everywhere. Christmas
comes whether we feel it in our
hearts, minds, and bones or
not.

Why are we drawn to
come here tonight? In what
way do we share something in
common when we hear the
words Blue and Christmas
together? Why have you come?
What are your personal
reasons? Why is it that tonight
you came to hear the story
again, the story of angels telling
the good news to shepherds so
long ago, to witness the birth of
Christ again, and to hear the
good news the Heavenly hosts,
these angels of God declare?

Maybe you have come
because your life feels instead
dark, because you find yourself
in the spirals of depression or

anxiety, and you hope that you will hear or see something that will help? Is that why you are here tonight?

Maybe you are here because you experienced the death of a loved one this year. You lost a daughter, a son, a parent, a sister, a friend, a spouse or grandmother. I know that I would come in some hope that the sorrow I feel at the loss of a loved one would somehow be lessened when hearing the angel's tidings.

Why have you come tonight? Why, like all the others on earth, where everywhere it is Christmas, too, have you come tonight to church? Some of you I know have come because of your love for worship, finding the rites and rituals of this place to be healing.

Some of you have come tonight because you know you are dying. You know this will be your last Christmas on the earth. Maybe others do not know this, but you do, and you wish to spend this last Christmas here to hear the

good news of salvation given to you through the little babe in Bethlehem, spending it here with your family for that final Christmas.

And some of you are here because you worry you are losing your faith. A spouse, a friend, even yourself may have dragged you here and you aren't even sure of all this God stuff. You just don't know what to believe and are unsure if it means anything anyway. There may even be an uneasiness that you don't know how to engage in the church of your childhood again. How would you even start when the church isn't the same without that loved one with you in the pew.

And, some of you are here because you want to support others who have felt loss. It is the place for which you return over and over because you care deeply for those who gather here.

Why? Why have you come? Why are you here? Why are we here? I know that all of you have a purpose, a reason for being here. You may

not be able to define it, yet still you were drawn here tonight for a purpose and you have feelings on that purpose, each feeling here being valid for the reason behind it.

Now, let me tell you why I am here tonight. You might be thinking, "Well, you are the pastor. You were asked to be the preacher this year. That's why you are here." Well, let me tell you that while as I love Christmas and the message it brings, and although I am an ordained person who is an advocate for Christ, and although I speak a word of love every Sunday in this pulpit here, I also come here because...well, I am afraid. Like the shepherds who see the amazing sight of angels, I have fear.

Like all the people of God before me, those in Scripture and those today, I know what it is to feel loss, anxiety and fear for the future. Occasionally, after experiencing the hardships of some of my people, after witnessing many deaths in this community, diagnosis, and marriage difficulties of those around me,

I am afraid about this: that the message of Christmas is a nice story, but really, can it make an impact? I am afraid that all our efforts to proclaim this God of love are really efforts to fool us into feeling better about the things that happen to us. I am afraid that there is really nothing beyond the grave and that death is simply death.

Now, please do not be concerned. These fears are fleeting moments when the human worrier in me takes over and I wonder at where God is in all this stuff called life. And, with all the fires, the floods and hurricanes, with all the gun violence, and lack of compassion for the plight of the refugee and the poor, I am simply admitting what many people are wondering; how it can be that the Good News is real in the din of suffering.

And, especially today, when even you here have been through trauma, grief, and loss, it's not a small thing to ask, "Why are we here"? These fears are related to the basic underlying fear of the human being, that of truly needing God and wondering how that

need can be fulfilled. I like many of you, wonder in the back of my mind, "What if all this Good News isn't real." And, if you have never thought this, give thanks, for you are truly blessed.

But, then, suddenly, all my fear is confounded when the Christmas Eve message is proclaimed, when the Visible Beauty of God Incarnate, who came to earth to be like me and you, who *did* doubt in God when his death came closer, who *did* experience fear and betrayal of friends, and who *did* wonder why God had abandoned him...

This God came to us as a weak human being, whose parents stomped around in the manure at his birth in a stable, whose existence was no more than as a peasant, and whose death was humiliating and cruel. Oh, yes, now *this* is a God that is real, especially at times of great fear, when I wonder if it's even worth it.

A few years ago, I lost an important mentor to me, one of my seminary professors. His name was Dr. Robert Smith and

he taught us New Testament Greek, the language of the New Testament. Since much of the bible was written in Greek, many of us would look for truth there, in the Greek texts of the gospels, wanting to find God present in the original language of those gospels. We would pour through the verbs present tense, future tense, pluperfect tense, to see if God could be revealed there, as if proving something in the text could prove that God did indeed love us.

I remember Dr. Smith saying, "Look, God isn't a text. God isn't the bible. God isn't a book written down where all of God can be figured out. The truth of God is in another place. Walk to the stable, look in the manger and to your complete surprise, there you will find God. God is a person, an infant, one who became like us because of love for us. Look for God in a lowly food trough. God was willing to do that for you, which makes it all the more true for the world, and no bible text or reading can ever do that for you."

Why are you here tonight? Why am I here? Because ultimately when we are afraid, for whatever reason, for out of loss, for out of expectation or hope of the future, for out of despair or lack of faith, God is there in a little manger. The truth that there is something beyond us past the grave is present in Immanuel, God who is with us...truly with us even though we are afraid that God isn't.

The Christmas angels declare it: "Do not be afraid, for unto you is born this day in the city a David, a savior, who is Christ the Messiah, the Lord."

As the poet Phillip Brooks once declared in this poem:

"For the Christ-child who comes is the Master of all, no place too great and no cottage too small. The Angels who welcome Him sing from the height, "In the city of David, a King in His might." Everywhere, everywhere, Christmas tonight."

For this Good News we come here tonight, not asking that our loss be lessened, not asking

that we forget the grief that we feel, but instead knowing that our God came so that despite the loss, we need not be afraid as the angels declared in their heavenly realm.

For unto you is born the one who knows your fear. And he will never leave you even now.

Amen.