

Christmas Eve 2020 Sermon

“Joy to the world! The Lord **IS** come!”

Have you ever noticed how many of our Christmas carols are in the present tense? “The Lord **IS** come!” It had never dawned on me before, as often as I’ve sung them down through the decades. But now that I see it, it’s uncanny. So many of our Christmas carols do not speak in the past tense about what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago; rather, they speak as if it were all happening **NOW**, in the present, to you and to me, today.

“...with th’ angelic host proclaim Christ **is** born in Bethlehem!”

“Go tell it on the mountain that Jesus Christ **IS** born...” Not “was.”

“Good Christian friends rejoice with heart and soul and voice; give ye heed to what we say: Jesus Christ is born **today**. Ox and ass before him bow and he is in the manger **now**. Christ is born **today!** Christ is born **today!**”

Silent night, holy night, all **IS** calm all **IS** bright. Not “was.”

Perhaps *most* striking is that carol written at the end of the 19th Century by Episcopal Bishop Phillips Brooks:

“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still **we** see thee lie...
The hopes and fears of **all** the years
Are met in thee **tonight**.”

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;
O come to *us*, **abide** with *us*,
Our Lord **Emmanuel!**”

Emmanuel, which means “God **is** with *us*.” **NOW**. Today. For so many of the authors of our favorite Christmas carols, Christmas is not just something that happened long ago and far away; it is something that *continues* to happen in the present; in the **NOW**.

And perhaps we’re more able to hear and receive that truth *this* Christmas than in any Christmases past; because the present pandemic has forced most of us to pare down the habitual rush, frenzy, noise, buying and wrapping, accumulating, and

over-busyness which have become so ingrained in us and in our culture at this time of year. **This** year, because of this *tragic* pandemic, at least **some** of our frenetic activity has been dampened; some of the noise muted. Benedictine monk David Steindl-Rast recently wrote, “When the usual trimmings are missing... it’s easier to see the essentials. ... We can receive this as a great gift... Increased silence in the time of quarantine wants to teach us to listen with our hearts.”¹ Increased silence in the time of quarantine wants to teach us to listen with our hearts.

In Bishop Brooks’ Christmas carol, we sing,

How silently, how silently
The wondrous gift given!
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of His heaven.
No ear may hear His coming [we listen with our hearts!];
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him, Still
The dear Christ enters in.

As with Mary, whose meek soul and surrendered will opened her to the work of the Spirit within her, our *own* meek and trusting receptivity can become the womb from which we, too, give birth to Christ in this world. 14th Century Dominican Friar Meister Eckhart wrote, “We are **all** meant to be mothers of God... What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son [in Bethlehem] if **I** do not **also** give birth to him in **my** time and culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.”²

Episcopal priest Vincent Pizzuto notes that, while the incarnation of God in that manger in Bethlehem was a historical event, it was not “a **singular** moment in history, having come and gone with the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. [Like] Mary, we too must ceaselessly give birth to Christ in our own ‘time and culture.’ [Meister] Eckhart says this is possible because at the deepest core of every person is... [a silent openness.] Like the Virgin’s womb it is the eternal meeting place between the divine and human within every person. Each of us comes to embody the ongoing and ever expanding enfleshment of God across time and space, made manifest whenever Christ is ‘begotten in us.’ Christmas... offers an opportunity to contemplate on this deepest of Christian mysteries: the Birth of God,”³ not **just** as a historical event 2000 years ago, but as an **interior** reality, here, and NOW.

O Holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to **us**, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in;
Be born in *us*, **today!**

AMEN

1 “Silence and Belonging,” <https://gratefulness.org/blog/silence-and-belonging-a-letter-from-br-david/>

2 Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, trans. D. C. Schindler, 2004, p. 42.

3 “The Birth of God Within,” The Rev. Dr. Vincent Pizzuto, posted to the Contemplative Outreach web site June 20, 2020

<https://www.contemplativeoutreach.org/2020/06/19/the-birth-of-god-within/>