

Sermon, December 14, 2008
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Grace Church, Georgetown

Our service started this morning with the hymn, "Once in Royal David's City." Let us now turn to remember this royal city, the town of Bethlehem, so we may re-discover the strength of our Christmas story. Our Christian history starts with Jesus born in a small town of Bethlehem, not far from the great capitol city of Jerusalem.

Places have personalities as do people. And the little town of Bethlehem took shape under the watchful eye of God. For this town of Bethlehem lay next to the rolling hills of the dangerous wilderness of Judaea. At that time in this wilderness, predators of lions and bears freely roamed. In this wilderness, bandits and outcasts frequently sought a sanctuary where they could hide themselves. In this wilderness, a few men and women became hermits and sought a deeper knowledge of God in quiet so they could see God face to face. At times this solitude itself became dangerous.

But because of this close proximity to danger, Bethlehem developed its distinctive personality. For Bethlehem knew how important human community was for its very survival. Bethlehem became a place that welcomed those coming from the wilderness. Everyone knew that if could make it to Bethlehem, you would find safety. Come here and find a meal and place to sleep! Come here and sit down for a friendly talk next to a quiet fire. For seeing the wilderness day in and day out taught them how crucial human relationships are. In this regard, our Grace Church, Georgetown is similar. Every person has gifts they offer that keep faith and love, food and shelter, alive in a world fraught with danger. And out of this welcoming character of Bethlehem came great gifts for all humanity.

This welcoming nature created in Bethlehem love, faith and hope. These are such extraordinary commodities in a dangerous world that every year we remember this. This quirky, eccentric town on the edge of the wilderness produced three people that knew how to love. The character of Bethlehem as a place of welcome for people coming from the wilderness helped teach them the power of love.

Bethlehem claims a daughter in the loving life of Ruth. Naomi, her husband and two sons, had to leave Bethlehem when a famine threatened their town. While in Moab, Naomi's sons married women, one of them named Ruth. Not an Israelite, Ruth loved her husband and his family. Ruth knew great wonder at life. She knew that such a husband came from his kind mother, Naomi.

Then all fell apart in the lives of Ruth and Naomi, when one by one, Naomi's husband and two sons died. Ruth knew that this destruction was like an opening

that God would honor by his presence. Somehow Ruth understood that God would build something new and wonderful upon their faith through these difficult times. Expecting to go home alone, Naomi began her sad journey back to Bethlehem. Yet one daughter-in-law, Ruth, declared her pure love for this woman and insisted on staying with her. She spoke in love, "Whither thou goest, I will go. And where thou lodgest, I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people, and thy God, my God." (Ruth 1:16) Ruth, stubbornly clung to her mother-in-law Naomi, and accompanied her back to this place lying on the edge of the wilderness of Judaea. So Ruth returned to this town, Bethlehem, a tiny vestige of human civilization, resting on the outskirts of wilderness.

Ruth, so vibrant and alive, loved life and threw herself into hard work of gleaning the fields. In the evening she poured the grain into the welcoming arms of her mother-in-law. They would pray together before facing into another day of struggle. Ruth gleaned in the fields surrounding Bethlehem. Soon Ruth met and married Boaz.

Out of the lineage of the absolute faith and pure love of Ruth and Boaz came their great-grandson, David. As a young boy, David tended sheep in the hills surrounding Bethlehem. One day the prophet Samuel visited Bethlehem, took the rich oil, dedicated to the work of the Holy God, and poured this over the head of David. Samuel prayed, "You are the Lord's anointed." In time, David became the great king of Israel in about 1000 B.C.

King David became the essence of passion towards God. He was one of the greatest military leaders of all time. David was also a poet and a musician who danced before the Lord. Tradition says that he wrote the most famous of Psalms, "The Lord is my shepherd!" (Psalm 23) King David taught his people how to praise God.

Later the town of Bethlehem became the home of the descendants of David and Ruth. Bethlehem became the future focus of the prophets with Micah proclaiming "But you, O Bethlehem Epharatha, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days." 5:2

Among the descendants of King David came the baby Jesus, born about twenty-eight generations later. Jesus who became known as the Christ, the anointed one of God was born to save us from our sins, our alienation and estrangement from God and from one another.

Jesus, born to the teenage Mary and her betrothed, needed help from their town of Bethlehem. She came town to deliver the child and had no place to rest. So someone said, "Come on in to this manger!" And Jesus was born that wonderful night, in a place something like a small cave.

Later in life, Jesus' friend Lazarus died. When he came to Lazarus' tomb, Jesus wept. People watching Jesus said about him, "See how he loved him!" (John 11:36) We think of Jesus in this way: See how he loved! I am sure that we would all like this said about us. People look at our lives and say: See how he loves, see how she loves and see how they love. Jesus carried this love around in the world until the time of his Sacrifice and Passion. Following his resurrection, his love still blesses us

But how do we love God as passionately as did Ruth, David, and Jesus? To answer this I wish to use a meditation from St. Augustine. How do we grow to love God as they did?

This Christmas I invite us to think about the loves of our lives. What do you love about being alive this Christmas, 2008? What do you love about being a human being?

This Christmas we might love the lights. We see the flame of the Advent candles and the candles on the altar. Or we might love the twinkling, colorful Christmas lights. We might enjoy sitting on a couch and just savoring the beauty of the lights decorating our trees and windows.

This Christmas season we might love the aroma of favorite foods cooking. We might remember a favorite food from our childhood. Perhaps the smell of pumpkin pie or a bread pudding brings us comfort as we reflect on previous years.

This Christmas we might enjoy the smile and hugs of children as they excitedly wait for the arrival of presents and Santa Claus. In the Christmas pageant this morning, we saw the joy of the children as they so wonderfully acted out the story of Mary, Joseph, the angels and the shepherds. We enjoy the laughter of children as they remember the ageless story.

This Christmas we might enjoy the music. We listen with happiness to our favorite Christmas carols. This morning we heard such beautiful anthems sung by the Grace Church choir from Handel's *Messiah*.

St. Augustine tells us to ponder the mystery of these loves. When we love these human experiences, we love God. For take all of these wonderful Christmas moments, intensify them millions of times, and we taste a small amount of the refreshing, spectacular love of God. Remember what we love and in the passion of these loves, we can taste even now what the wonder and love of God is.

For as St. Augustine says, God is like a beautiful light that has no beginning and no end. This eternal light glows in all areas of our life.

God is like a fragrant aroma, such as a beautiful perfume or the smell of bread baking. But the fragrance lasts forever and no wind can sweep this perfume away. God is like a beautiful fragrance that clings to us always.

God is like a hug that already has begun in our lives and will last through eternity. God looks upon us with love that embraces us always.

God is like a familiar Christmas song that we hear this season. Yet the song of God is so powerful that this song carries us throughout our lives. We can trust and rest upon this everlasting song of God.

God is like a favorite food, a simple bread and wine on our altar. But the surprising part of this food, is that the more we eat and drink, the more there is. Come one and all to the altar of God to eat this warm bread and drink this refreshing wine!

We too know that this is a dangerous world. Yet, like the good people of Bethlehem, we know what to do in this face of this danger. In danger, we affirm our faith, hope and love. When we love, we are part of our Christian story. When we hope, we look forward to the great coming actions of God. When we have faith, we receive in our very being, the character and being of God. Our Christmas pageant reminds us of our connection through love as we raise our children together in this welcoming community. We are those who watch and wait for the King, the Christ, the anointed one, born as a baby in Bethlehem.

Today we carry the warmth of Christ and our powerful faith among us. We live knowing that the goodness of God grasps our very lives and accompanies our every step.

I wish you all a Merry Christmas! May we all know the great love of Christ in our Christmas season.