

Christmas
Cycle B
December 25, 2011 4pm Midnight 12noon
Saint Margaret Parish, Bel Air

O Little Town of Bethlehem

Back in the nineteenth century, in the 1870's, there was an American preacher named Phillips Brooks.

One December, shortly before Christmas, Phillips Brooks visited the Holy Land. On that Christmas Eve, he made the trip from Jerusalem to Bethlehem on horseback.

From a distance, Brooks saw the little town of Bethlehem lit up against the darkness of the night. That sight made a great impression on him and a year later it inspired Brooks to write some verses.

Then his church organist composed a tune to go with them. That hymn has become a standard carol for Christmas, and of course, it goes like this:

*“O little town of Bethlehem,
How still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by;
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light;
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.”*

Darkness and Light in Scripture

“Yet in thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light” – those words really capture my attention this Christmas.

They express the contrast between darkness and light that Christmas is all about. In tonight's first reading, the Prophet Isaiah says: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom, a light has shone.”*

Isaiah looks ahead to a moment when God will penetrate the darkness that can fill our lives with gloom. He foresees a moment when God will break through and be a light in that darkness.

We now see Isaiah's prophecy fulfilled in the birth of Jesus. And yet, even the story of Jesus' birth tells us that the star which guides the Wise Men does not drive all the darkness away.

Instead, the light of that star shines in the darkness and is a help and guide through it. I suggest that for us, the light of Bethlehem operates in the same way.

Light in Darkness Today

Each one of us, I believe, experiences some kind of darkness. And in that darkness, we are invited and even urged to look to the light of Bethlehem.

Maybe we find ourselves in the darkness of loneliness after the death of a spouse or other loved one. In this darkness, the light of Bethlehem gives us the presence of Emmanuel, God-with-us as we walk through the tunnel seeking consolation and fuller light.

Maybe we find ourselves in the darkness of doubt and questioning, of wondering why we are living and what we really believe. In this darkness, the light of Bethlehem gives us a vision for where we are going and how to get there.

Maybe we find ourselves in the darkness of cold, of a marriage or relationship with a child or parent or close friend that has grown cold. In this darkness, the light of Bethlehem gives us the warmth of God's love and moves us to extend and accept signs and glimmers of that love.

Maybe we find ourselves in the darkness of feeling stuck, trapped in some habit or addiction or compulsion that is destructive. In this darkness, the light of Bethlehem gives us the possibility of human growth and invites us to search like the magi for persons or programs that can help us with that growing.

And finally, maybe we find ourselves in the darkness of anxiety about our financial security. In this darkness, the light of Bethlehem gives us hope by finding our stability and security in Jesus as we work our way through the difficulties.

Conclusion

So, *"In thy dark streets shineth The everlasting light."*

The light shines in the darkness of Bethlehem and it shines in our own darkness as well. The darkness remains but there is indeed light with the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God-with-us.

Let's look to that light in whatever darkness we may have. Let us allow the light of Jesus to give us comfort, vision, warmth, growth, and hope – the gifts that the light of Bethlehem can give above any other kind of light.