

## Christmas message, 2008

Let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, our Lord and our Redeemer.

Amen

Come to Bethlehem and see!

I have been thinking recently about why we come home for Christmas. Why do people all over the world get on crowded planes, battle the insanity of holiday traffic and inclement weather, just to be home.

What is the force that draws us home, and if we cannot be there, think of home?

It is because it is home – where we come from; our roots. It is the force of Bethlehem, drawing us to our origins, just as Joseph was called to the city of his ancestors to be counted. So we get on the plane or in the car, and we arrive, and in the middle of it all, we may find ourselves at the manger.

And if we cannot get to that place we once called home, we are still drawn by Bethlehem.

This is that place without ticket or traffic that resides in our hearts. We need to hear this story. There is a yearning deeper than geography or genetics that calls us to Bethlehem.

We need to **hear** this story, just as we need to hear the stories of our own origins, because they are at once, on this holy night (day) the same story.

We need to **see** this story with our own eyes, just as we need to see our own family photos. This IS our family photo. And so we set up the crèches, dress up the kids in bathrobes and dishtowels, and create live tableaux, so we can once again enter the story.

It is the story of the incarnation of light into the world, the light that was there before the world began, and will be there forever. It is the story of light coming into a world of darkness.

We live in a world where darkness is almost everywhere. It is the darkness of war, of hunger, a world where there is betrayal and bitterness. It is a world where some are imprisoned behind bars of fear and others are imprisoned behind barbed wire.

These are realities that cannot be denied or ignored. That darkness invades our own lives as well. You may recall the bumper sticker that proclaims, “*Life is hard, and then you die.*” It may elicit a chuckle, as the most painful truths sometimes do. But life IS hard.

How is it, then, that people seem to not only accept that hardship with grace, but also strive to make changes that lift the darkness just a little bit? Not only do they carry the light of Bethlehem in them as we all do, they reflect that light back out into the world, combating the darkness.

It could be as small as forgiving someone for a tiny indiscretion, or as large as sacrificing something in our own lives to improve the lives of others. The light of Bethlehem can start as small as a tiny Christmas light, but can grow as large as the sun if we let it.

In a world of darkness, change is seen as dangerous. Ask any blind person how they would feel if someone changed the furniture around without telling them first. Just so with any change; it is seen as a danger to the status quo.

We can live in a world of rules that no longer apply, of old ways of thinking, of old paradigms that stunt our growth. And those old paradigms can be so familiar that they are like the shadows on the walls of Plato's cave. They can be our reality if that is all we see. And in that darkness, we stumble around thinking this is normal. It becomes our normal.

**But there is the force of Bethlehem that draws us out of darkness with one extraordinary event that changed the world.**

It draws us out of our ordinary lives into amazement, and infuses the ordinary with its light. It is the light of amazement that the shepherds saw on their dark night on that hillside.

**It is the light that says, God is with us.**

It is the light of our origin in the image of God. It is the light by which we enter the story, become the story, and become the children of God.

Come to Bethlehem! Enter the story! Come and see!  
Who is this child, wrapped in the rags of love and lying in a manger?  
Look carefully into his eyes and see your own reflection!  
Hold him close to your heart, and feel him under your own chest wall, this incarnation of God love, this light!  
“Oh, morning stars, together proclaim the holy birth!”

In the relationship that God offers us we give birth to the holiness in ourselves. We give birth to the Light.

In **this** birth, at **this** manger, God invites us to be in relationship with God, to experience God, to be the heirs of this eternal moment of love. To be in relationship with a God that will not stop existing.

This God, which is love, can never stop existing, even in a world of shadows. Even in the saddest of circumstances.

And from this God, which is not LIKE love, but IS love, love with no ending or boundaries, is born the Christ child. Born not only **to** us but also **in** us.

What is the force that brings us home to Bethlehem, the place not seen in any geography books but only in the atlas of the human heart?

What draws us to the manger?

It is our connection in Christ.

We are drawn to the manger connected to God in one another. Look at the rail of the balcony. The design, by John Amero, is a series of “Vesica Pisces”

It symbolizes the inter-connectedness of us all. In the middle of each overlapping circle, you will see the shape of a fish, the symbol of Christ used by the early Christians, or if you will, the shape of the sacred birth opening. In our connectedness, there is the sacred, the birth of the divine if we allow it.

This birth opening is not nearly as pristine or clear cut as the balcony rails. Ask any mother about her labor pains. A child is born of earth and blood and sweat, and even though our Christian tradition has cleaned up that part of the story for us, we can assume that that holy child’s birth was not without its labor pains.

Neither is our own birth of the Divine. How much easier it might seem to be to stay in the shadows of our discomfort, than to give birth to the light within myself! How much easier to never move the furniture! To just stay where we are?

Come to Bethlehem?

What kind of yearning or holy foolishness draws us to Bethlehem, to the place of our origins? What draws us to the roots of our roots, a place without place?

What draws us, like the shepherds, to interrupt our daily lives and enter into the unknown?

It is the place of hope.

     This Bethlehem is a place inside us all, a place that is always in us, wherever we are in the world, whether we are in the dining room of the Ritz

or on a dusty road in Iraq whether we are at the beginning of our human journey or at the end.

It is our deep and poignant rootedness. It is the origin beyond all our earthly origins that calls us to the manger to be called beloved children of God.

“We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell!”

**Hope is born here.**

**Be not afraid.**

**We are wrapped in God’s love, keepers of the Light.**

So we set out the crèche, and we follow the shepherds. We gather in Bethlehem, at the source of our longing, and we kneel at the manger one more year. Every time we enter the story, it becomes our story.

The darkness and fears of the world cannot be ignored.

But on this holiest of nights, we know that they can be defied.

Into the silence of our night there comes a child called Jesus...

“Son of God, love’s pure light,... with the dawn of redeeming grace.

Jesus. Lord at thy birth!”

Amen