

Christmas Eve, Year C (Vigil Service Readings for both 5:30 PM and 11:00 PM)
The Reverend D.S. Mote, PhD
St Paul's Episcopal Church, Key West, FL
December 24, 2021
Isaiah 9:2-7
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

O Come, All Ye Faithful and Everybody Else, Too

In my home growing up, I watched the annual showings of Christmas cartoons and stop-action claymation films. Do you know what I'm talking about? Frosty. Rudolf. All the usual suspects. My two favorites, then and now, are "How the Grinch Stole Christmas" and "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

I loved the grinchiness of the Grinch, how "he slithered and slunk with a smile most unpleasant around the whole room and he took every present." I loved his dog Max. I loved Cindy Lou Who. I used to wish for a can of Who Hash. I loved the message that true Christmas can't be stolen; can't be stopped. It will come anyway. No matter what.

And I loved the Peanuts gang from an early age. Almost all of them played with me regularly as my imaginary friends. I loved Sally Brown especially. And, as a church nerd even as a little kid, I loved it so much that Linus Van Pelt could recite, just like me, the entirety of Luke 2:8-14, a crucial portion of the gospel reading we have just heard. And I loved that having recited the Christmas story, Linus could then simply say, without bragging or snark or sarcasm, "That's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

The Christmas story from Luke chapter 2 presents us a classic narrative of government requirements, arduous travel, a shortage of affordable housing, people working the midnight shift, heavenly messengers that fill the sky with light and song, bewildered new parents, awe, glory, and a baby the weary world has been waiting for.

In the verses that Linus quotes, basically, heavenly messengers come to brigands and thugs in the field, for brigands and thugs are the people who were shepherds in those days. They were legal and social outcasts doing work that only outcasts did. Yet, the best news in a long time, of all time, comes first to people who had been written off and cast aside by most other people while they work third shift under a wide starry sky.

This is the Christmas gospel that by longstanding tradition we hear now, in the middle of the night as December 24 becomes December 25. In the darkest part of the night, we receive a message that grace is born anew. For in the deepest dark is where new radiance is born. Always.

The angels declare this amazing news first to the shepherds, revealing that those on the margins are at the center of the divine story. The shepherds receive these glad tidings and go to see for themselves, revealing that this story is our story; we can live the truth of it as they did and find grace born anew in the darkness.

Christmas points not backward to a day in the past but forward to today and tomorrow and all the days in which matter and spirit are joined, together, when divine love takes on human form. Because the divine became human, we humans can experience the divine intimately. We can remember ourselves and return to ourselves as bearers of the image of God. Capable of possibility. Capable of purpose. Capable of service. Capable of love.

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Something about this season prompts us to try again to find goodwill among all people, to be part of creating that goodwill. Something about this season makes us remember wishes from long ago. Some things about this season may also bring us great pain as we pass through it for the first time or one more time without someone we love very much.

There may be as many reasons that folks are here tonight and watching the livestream as there are folks gathered and viewing. Something about this holy night encourages us to believe in beauty, to hold on to hope.

And this story, so familiar, remains the chronicle of the beginning of a love revolution, when God came to us so that we could fully come to God.

I'm here tonight for multiple reasons. It's my job to be here, that's true. And I'm also here because I want to mark this night as holy, as mysterious, as redolent with radiance, as testimony to truth that I don't quite have words to express.

Maybe you are here for similar reasons. Maybe for different ones. For the beauty of the space here at St Paul's perhaps. Or because you couldn't come last year. Or because you always come to St Paul's on Christmas Eve. Or because you've

always wanted to spend Christmas in Key West, and here you are. Or maybe you're not sure why you're here in person or why you're streaming this service.

Whatever our reason or reasons—including no particular reason—it's not an accident that we are gathered here together. You could call it providence, serendipity, synchronicity, but it's not an accident that we are here now together. If we are participating in this service, we are open somehow, some way to something good, true, pure, lovely, lifechanging.

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I close with some words of welcome from Scotland, from the island of Iona.

Iona is a tiny and beautiful island off the west coast of Scotland. It is 1.5 miles wide and 3 miles long. Sounds a little familiar, yes? A little shorter by about a mile than this lovely key, and, with a population of around 180 permanent residents, quite a bit less populated than Cayo Hueso.

Iona is where the Irish monk Columba established a monastery in 563 CE. It's the cradle of Christianity in Scotland and over the years became an important center of European Christianity. Many thousands of people have visited Iona over these past 1,458 years.

The abbey of Iona was destroyed by Vikings and then rebuilt in the late 12th century. And then monastic life there was again brought to a halt in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The buildings were in disuse and fell into ruins.

But in the midst of the Great Depression of the 20th century, an idea was hatched by a minister named George MacLeod. In 1938, MacLeod was serving in a parish in the city of Glasgow filled with highly skilled but unemployed workers. He brought a bunch of those folks and some people training for the ministry with him to the island of Iona. Together they rebuilt the abbey and other buildings on the island. And these unlikely comrades built community among themselves as they worked and worshipped together. What is now called the Iona Community emerged from this experiment in rebuilding and restoring historic structures.

The Iona Community continues to worship in these reconstructed ancient buildings, and they share their prayers with the world. When it's time for communion at Iona, they offer this invitation. It's the invitation to you, to me, to us, tonight as we celebrate the birth of God incarnate come among us.

The Iona Invitation

This is the table, not of the Church but of Jesus Christ. It is made ready for those who love God and who want to love God more. So come, you who have much faith and you who have little, You who have been here often and you who have not been for a long time or ever before, You who have tried to follow and you who have failed. Come, not because the Church invites you; It is Christ who invites you to be known and fed here.

So, come.