

**FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
305 EAST MAIN STREET
DURHAM, NC 27701
PHONE: (919) 682-5511**



“Love in Action”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

Christmas Eve (Year A)

December 24, 2016

Isaiah 9:2b-7; Luke 2:1-20

Do you hear it, friends? Do you hear it? The hush. The quiet. The end of all the hustle and bustle, the shops and the traffic, the rush, the crowds, the noise, the canned Christmas music playing on the radio and in the shopping malls since before Halloween? Do you hear it? The silence? This is what we have waited for, you know. This is it. And this may be the only time of the year we really get it. The only time of year that the whole world stops, if only for a moment, and looks at the stars, or stares into the fluttering candlelight, or glittering firelight, or gazes upon the manger scene and wonders “What does it mean?” “Does it really make a difference? In my life? In the world?” For a brief moment we leave the world behind, with all its violence, hatred, dishonesty and sadness. We leave it behind and gather here to join the world as it pauses collectively and ponders the meaning of life, hopes for peace, and waits for love.

Some of you may know the story of Christmas Eve 1914. It is the story of peace in the midst of war. Along the Western Front, during World War I, British and German troops unofficially declared a cease-fire and celebrated Christmas by being, at least for a little while, at peace. The Christmas Eve truce started when German troops began decorating the area around their trenches in Belgium.

The Germans began by placing candles on their trenches and on Christmas trees, then continued the celebration by singing Christmas carols. The British responded by singing carols of their own. The two sides continued by shouting Christmas greetings to each other. Soon thereafter, there were

excursions across the ‘No Man's Land,’ where small gifts were exchanged, such as food, tobacco and alcohol, and souvenirs such as buttons and hats. The artillery in the region fell silent that night. The truce also allowed a breathing spell where recently fallen soldiers could be brought back behind their lines by burial parties. Joint services were held. . . . In many sectors, the truce lasted through Christmas night, but it continued until New Year’s Day in others.¹

Silent Night, Holy Night. In spite of the war, it was.

Some years ago, when my son Tyler was still a pre-teen, he and I made our way to Duke Chapel to hear the North Carolina Boys Choir sing their annual Christmas concert. We found a nice spot on the end of a pew and waited for the concert to begin. As we waited, I observed the landscape around me—people of all ages, shapes, sizes, and colors moved around, looking for friends and family, saving spaces for those who were late, shuffling their boys off to their designated spots, and talking, talking, talking. There was a young girl next to me, around six years old, with long, straight blonde hair pulled back with a ribbon. She had pulled a hymnal out of the pew rack and was flipping through it. She landed on something she knew and immediately said out loud, “I know this one!” Her mother was preoccupied, talking on the telephone to someone who might have been her realtor, as those around us could not help but hear the details of her house as she spoke. So I leaned over and talked to the little girl, whose name, I learned, was Amanda. She couldn’t read every word of the hymn, so I helped her follow along. Her mother chatted away on the phone. Tyler played his PSP next to me. The grand sanctuary was filled with chatter and waiting and preparation for the concert to begin. And then the organ began to play, quietly, quietly, as if inviting us gently to prepare for what was to come. Most people stopped talking and turned their eyes forward, but many did not. Tyler reluctantly put away his PSP, Amanda flipped roughly through the hymnal, her mother continued to talk on the phone. The family of three boys sitting behind us squirmed into a spot between the adults who had brought them. The organ music stopped. The doors of the back of the sanctuary opened and the magical sound of boys’ voices began to drift through the vast space.

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christmas_truce

Of the Father's love begotten,
Ere the world began to be.
He is alpha and omega.
He the source, the ending he.
Of the things that are that have been
And that ever more will be
Evermore and evermore.

And then—the *a cappella* voice of little Kip Brouwer—

“Once in Royal David's City, stood a lowly cattle shed,
where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed.”

Suddenly the chaos around me—the squirming, the chatting, the cell phone, the glares from those who wanted silence—all faded into the background and disappeared as I felt a tear well up in my eye.

Silent Night. Holy Night. In spite of the chaos, it was.

On a night long ago in Bethlehem, things weren't as pretty and idyllic as our Christmas cards and crèches make them out to be today. Mary would have been exhausted and quite uncomfortable after labor and delivery, trying to find a soft spot to nurse her baby in the hay. Joseph was probably frantically cleaning up or checking Jesus' vital signs, or shooing away the curious goats, or piling up hay under Mary's head, or looking for something to eat and drink. The shepherds who had shown up were most-likely rough and dirty and renegade and probably cursed like sailors. They weren't especially holy in any way, and they were most likely scared senseless after that angel appeared in the sky. Nothing about this scene was pristine, nothing about this scene was ordered, or clean, or royal, or lovely. Everything about this scene was perfect. The perfect place for God to become human was in the mist of imperfection.

Silent Night. Holy Night. In spite of the dirt and poverty, it was.

On this night, God came to us in the form of a baby, and truthfully? All the cow dung, smelly hay, goat breath, and drafty cracks in the stable walls—all the terrified, uncouth, dirty shepherds—all the worn out parents in the world—all the Herods, all those who rule out of hate, all the armies and terrorists of the world—all the chaos all around us—couldn't keep that baby from being born—couldn't keep our God from coming to be with us, couldn't keep love from breaking into our world.

Many in our world go to bed not in silence or holiness but in the middle of violence and the sound of gunshots and bombings. Many go to bed in fear, wondering if they are safe, wondering if the world sees them as fully human. Many go to bed in tears, longing for safety and security, longing for peace.

Jesus became human right in the middle of such fears, tears and chaos. Jesus guides us now to live a love that overcomes hate and destroys fear. We are the ones who are called not to linger at the manger but to enter the world as Jesus entered the world, caring for the poor, receiving the outcast, welcoming the stranger. Jesus loved us with a love that cannot be comprehended. He calls us to follow him and to love with that same love.

There is a wonderful little story told by J. B. Phillips about a senior angel giving a younger angel a tour of the universe. They pass the swirling galaxies, the black holes and the hot, bright stars. They see planets and moons and suns and meteors. At last they enter a small galaxy of about 500 billion stars.

As the two of them drew near to the star which we call our sun, [writes Phillips], and to its circling planets, the senior angel pointed to a small and rather insignificant sphere turning very slowly on its axis. It looked as dull as a dirty tennis ball to the little angel, whose mind was filled with the size and glory of what he had seen.

“I want you to watch that one particularly,” said the senior angel, pointing with his finger.

“Well, it looks very small and rather dirty to me,” said the little angel. “What is special about that one?”²

The senior angel went on to tell how God chose to visit this planet as one of the members of the planet. The little angel was aghast.

“Do you mean that our great and glorious Prince . . . went down in Person to this fifth-rate little ball? . . . that He stooped so low as to become one of those creeping, crawling creatures of that floating ball?”³

The senior angel responded patiently.

“I do, and I don’t think He would like you to call them ‘creeping, crawling creatures’ in that tone of voice. For, strange as it may seem to us, He loves them. He went down to visit them to lift them up to Become like Him.”

The little angel looked blank. Such a thought was almost beyond comprehension.⁴

Silent Night. Holy Night. In spite of the incomprehensibility of it all, it was.

God became human. Here on earth. Out of love for us all. So that we might become like him.

And so I ask this night, dear friends, are we capable of such incredible love? Can we take such love into the darkest corners of our city, the darkest places in our world? Can we take such love to those who are persecuted and seen as second class citizens—the immigrant, the refugee, the prisoner, those with mental illness, the elderly poor, the abused child, the LGBTQ community, those of the Muslim faith, those who have no home, those who cannot feed their children? Can we fight for their full humanity? Jesus calls us to such active love, which we are capable of

² J. B. Phillips, “The Visited Planet,” <http://home.earthlink.net/~paulrack/id81.html>

³ Ibid.

⁴ Phillips.

only by the grace of God. Thankfully God's love has been poured out abundantly for us, most evidently, most personally, in the birth of this child.

The heavens have opened this night, my friends, and love has come down. May we leave this manger filled with the knowledge of God's love for us, ready to put love into action in the world.

Amen.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

© FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH 2016. FOR PERSONAL AND EDUCATIONAL USE ONLY.