

And the Soul Felt Its Worth

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Virginia Highland Church – Atlanta, Georgia

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2009

Text: Lyrics to “O Holy Night” Translation by John Sullivan Dwight;
carol composed by Adolphe Adam, based on a poem by Placide
Cappeau.

Followed by Prayer for the World and Communion.

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I am one of those who turns my car radio to 98.5 FM to enjoy Christmas music from Thanksgiving on. But, quite frankly, if I hear Burl Ives singing “Have a holly, jolly Christmas” one more time, I’m going to scream! It’s an “earworm” for me—y’know, one of those songs that gets into your head and you find yourself humming it all the time. Wade is soooo tired of hearing it as we walk the dog. And one night I woke in the middle of the night with its tune playing over and over again in my head.

But there has been another song played often this year that has been appealing to my spiritual imagination—and we’re going to hear it sung at the conclusion of my brief homily tonight. Right now I use its first verse and its chorus as a prayer:

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of Our dear Savior’s birth.
Long lay the world In sin and error pining,
‘Til Christ appear’d And the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope The weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks A new and glorious morn.
 Fall on your knees! O, hear the angels’ voices!
 O night divine, O night when Christ was born;
 O night divine, O night, O night Divine.

Every time I heard this carol during Advent, the phrase that leapt out at me was “And the soul felt its worth.” “And the soul felt its worth.” To me, that one phrase is awesome.

This Advent we've been talking about finding short phrases from our tradition that we can use as a kind of mantra, a kind of prayer, much like the ancient Christian mystics. They used a practice that is still used today, *Lectio Divina*, which translates simply "divine texts," but the process involves reading a text and selecting a phrase that leaps out at you for meditative repetition—a phrase that delights you, or puzzles you, or troubles you. Repeating the phrase over and over again, it is said, enables it to descend from the mind to the heart, and it is in the heart that its meaning for your life is revealed.

Tonight we read texts that could each be used for *Lectio Divina*. We heard from the Psalmist praise and from Isaiah prophecy. We listened to the vision of shepherds of angels singing in the night sky. We heard of sages coming from the East following a star. We listened to Mary's magnificent response to the awareness that she will bear a son who will transform the world. And we heard a theological interpretation of Christ's nativity: God's Word made flesh and dwelling among us, full of grace and truth.

But we've also been singing songs and hearing music throughout our service that reminds us of Christmases past as well as lifts our hopes about what Christmas means. And somehow, the combining of music and words touches our hearts directly, like a repetitive prayer. That's why music is so important to our worship and Jeff and Scott and the choir and visiting soloists and musicians are so highly valued.

So the text for my homily is based on one of these Christmas carols, "O Holy Night."

O holy night! The stars are brightly shining,
It is the night of Our dear Savior's birth.
Long lay the world In sin and error pining,
'Til Christ appear'd And the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope The weary world rejoices,
For yonder breaks A new and glorious morn.

"And the soul felt its worth. A thrill of hope / The weary world rejoices..." I pondered what illustration I could use to get across the meaning of "the soul felt its worth." Seeing love in the eyes of someone you love. Receiving praise from a person or group you respect. Being part of a good cause.

But what too often came to mind are the many ways in which the soul does not feel its worth in today's world: the maiming and killing of terrorism and war, the oppression of injustice, the hatred of prejudice, the violence of assault, the invasiveness of theft, the unfaithfulness or the abuse or exploitation of a relationship. These are obvious examples when the soul doubts its worth.

But there are less obvious examples: when we are unemployed or underemployed, when we can't afford food or healthcare, when we don't have shelter or education, when slighted by society or religion. And still less obvious examples that many of us may or have experienced this Christmas season: a cutting remark by a family member, an impatient look from a sales clerk, the failure of a loved one to phone. All of these occasion times when the soul does not feel its worth.

A publisher once asked me to write a book entitled, "Why I Am a Christian." I replied that ALL of my books attempt to answer that question. But what he meant was, despite everything, why I still valued my Christian identity. And I realized this week it is because as I draw close to Jesus, my soul feels its worth. The apostle Paul wrote the Ephesians, "God brought us to life with Christ. We are God's work of art" (Eph 2:4, 10; NJB). I have been brought to life with Christ. We have been brought to life with Christ. We are God's works of art.

So, whenever we celebrate the nativity of the Christ Child we celebrate our own nativity, the birth and rebirth of our own souls, the worth of our own souls.

Fall on your knees! O, hear the angel voices!
 O night divine, the night when Christ was born;
 O night divine, o holy night, O night divine.
 The King of Kings Lay thus in lowly manger;
 In all our trials Born to be our friend.

As if this were not enough, Christ's life we celebrate at Christmas must also become the life we live, the life of recognizing and reminding every soul of its sacred worth. As the final verse sings in our hearts:

Truly Christ taught us To love one another;
 Christ's law is love and his gospel is peace.
 Chains shall he break For the slave is our brother;
 And in his name All oppression shall cease.
 Sweet hymns of joy In grateful chorus raise we,
 Let all within us Praise Christ's holy name.

["O Holy Night" is sung.]

The Peace

The peace of Christ be with you. And also with you.

Let us pray:

Community Prayer for the World

O God,

you who separated light from the darkness

placed the stars in the skies,

and blessed our planet with abundant life:

Help all of humanity to bring healing to earth

and all its creatures;

Help us to bring peace to human conflict,

to transform oppression and injustice and inequality

that your reign may come, and your will be done.

May every soul feel its worth,

May every body be nourished,

May every heart find love,

May every mind be opened

That we, with wisdom and understanding

informed and inspired by compassion

may be as Christ in the world. Amen.

Communion

“Bethlehem” means “house of bread.” From this town, Jesus came, breaking bread with his disciples, making his compassion not only *known* to them but also *a part* of them so that their souls may know their worth.

And he poured the wine, passing the chalice not only as a sign of God's new relationship with them, but of their new relationship with God and with one another.

As it was in Jesus day, tonight at Virginia Highland Church you do not have to be a member of this church or any church to come to Christ's table, because Jesus welcomed all because we are all God's children.

Let us pray: Be known to us as we eat this bread and drink this cup, becoming your compassion for our world.

And as Jesus taught us to pray, we pray: Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread. Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever. Amen.