

Trinity Episcopal Church
Lawrence, Kansas
Sermon for December 24, 2009
Christmas Eve
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

For 151 years, the faithful have gathered in a house of worship on this corner to celebrate the news of our Savior's birth, drawing worshippers from earthly preoccupations and attachments and reminding them of the necessity of the meekness of children for anyone who would enter the realm of God. On Sunday and at tonight's early service, we experienced the annual Children's Christmas Pageant. Nobody has been able to tell me exactly how long the children of the parish have been presenting this pageant, but it is certainly a very, very long time. At Christmas, perhaps more than any other time of the year, it is the theology and spirituality of childhood that best informs and touches the heart. Many of our most cherished memories of Christmas are from our childhood or from the experience of the children in our lives.

When we are children, we relate so easily to the story of the Holy Child. Children don't have any trouble believing that God's plan for loving us includes a child and a family. When we grow older, the meekness of childhood is usually displaced by the pride and anxiety of all that we associate with adulthood. We are so smart, worldly, and self-sufficient that our ability to relate to the simplicity and gentleness of the Nativity is compromised. We have our issues and our games that obstruct our relationship with the One who came in meekness and humility to love us into glory. Our pride and our self-absorption undermine the sense of trust and wonder we knew at some point when shepherds, magi, angels, mangers, and a baby told us what is most real and who we truly are.

I am reminded of the great 20th Century neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, whose magnum opus, *Die Kirchliche Dogmatik* (*The Church Dogmatics*), written over a 36-year period, represented the pinnacle of his theological genius. But listen to what he once told a journalist: "I had a dream the other night in which I was making my way toward heaven and I was pulling a little red wagon. In the wagon were all of the books that I wrote during my lifetime – it was a rather heavy and impressive load! But as I got to the heavenly gates, I noticed that the angels were watching me. And as they looked into my wagon, they burst out laughing! And I recognized at that moment that the greatest theological insight I have ever had is this, 'Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so.'" Apparently, Karl Barth never lost the meekness of childhood that allowed him to bow before the God whose radical, redemptive, impact on the planet earth and the entire cosmos involves the Holy Birth.

On a television documentary concerning the birthplace of Jesus, one commentator said, "a Christian that doesn't believe Jesus was born in Bethlehem is a Christian without a pulse." While he may have gone a little too far in setting up such a geographical litmus test, I am intrigued with his description of "a Christian without a pulse." What kind of Christian has no pulse? A dead one? One without a heart? One whose Christianity is all form and no substance? One who is overly invested with being right? It occurs to me that if there is any part of the Christian story that is likely to restore our pulse to us when our heart of faith stops beating or quicken it when it is weak, it must be the story of the Christ Child. I'm not talking about the sentimentality and sugar-coated department store version of the Savior. I'm talking about the version we knew best when we were children, the one we know best today when the child within us is once again touched by it with wonder, love, and praise. It doesn't mean that we

discard our questions or our theological inquiries. But it does mean that that which keeps our hearts beating within our breasts draws its life from a manger in Bethlehem. Because of that phenomenon of inner transformation, when people come among us week by week when we gather here to worship throughout the rest of the year, they will find our pulse. Our joy and witness will be palpable.

This is my Christmas wish for all of us: that tonight every one of us will recover the meekness that is the pulse of faith. It is the manger in our hearts in which Christ is born anew. It is the simplicity and receptiveness of childhood that allows us to trust the good news to be good, that builds bridges between ourselves and our Creator as well as with our neighbors, and especially those we have trouble liking. Such meekness as God expresses toward his creation. Before the God whom the heaven of heavens cannot contain, yet who stoops to come under our roof, let us once again find the meekness that permits us to bow before him. Writer Max Lucado expresses it this way as he speaks of the Holy Birth: “So... while the theologians were sleeping and the elite were dreaming and the successful were snoring, the meek (and penitent) were kneeling. They were kneeling before the One only the meek and penitent will see. They were kneeling in front of Jesus.”

Phillips Brooks has been called “the greatest American preacher of the 19th Century.” Born December 13, 1835 in Boston, he attended the Boston Latin School, Harvard University (where Phillips Brooks House was named after him), and Episcopal Theological Seminary in Alexandria, Virginia. He became an Episcopal priest in 1860, and became Rector of the Church of the Advent, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was known for his support of freeing the slaves and allowing former slaves to vote. In 1869, he became Rector of Trinity Church in Boston. In 1872, he helped design the Trinity Church building, which today stands in Boston’s Back Bay. In 1891, he was elected and consecrated Bishop of Massachusetts. In 1865, while in the Holy Land, he was invited to assist with the midnight service on Christmas Eve. Brooks wrote about his horseback journey from Jerusalem to Bethlehem, “I remember standing in the old church in Bethlehem, close to the spot where Jesus was born, when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with splendid hymns of praise to God, how again and again it seemed as if I could hear voices I knew well, telling each other of the *Wonderful Night* of the Savior’s birth.” It was that blessed moment in his life that inspired him to write one of the most cherished of all Christmas carols, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv’n;
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His Heav’n.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in.

The Gospel of God begins with the Incarnation, God’s coming among us as the vulnerable Christ child. God in the flesh is the wondrous gift that is given to those whose hearts are meek enough to appreciate the gift and trusting enough to appropriate the gift. So, come. Together, let us go to Bethlehem to see this thing that has come to pass, so that we will have a pulse and so that the world of need at our doorstep will become a better place when we step into it because the pulse the world feels in us is the pulse of the One we have come to worship this Holy Night and who draws us back again and again to give us the wondrous gift.