

Hope, Embodied (If We Can Stay Silent Long Enough To See it)  
The Rev. Amy Spagna  
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2024  
Luke 2:1-14

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.*<sup>1</sup>

Shhhhh. We might miss it if we're not careful – the "it" being God sneaking into the world in human form. Nobody except this child's human parents and the gang of shepherds to whom the news was given knows anything about it. They're too busy with the hustle and bustle of preparations for family gatherings necessitated by the Emperor Augustus' desire to find out just how many people were living within the boundaries of his realm. That busy-ness has barely changed in the 2000 years since that first Christmas. We are often doing so much these days that we don't leave a lot of time to just sit and contemplate the enormity of this event. Phillips Brooks, the writer of the carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, did just that on Christmas Eve in 1865, when he spent most of the night at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. As he wrote to his parish, Holy Trinity in Philadelphia, a few weeks later: "... it seemed as if I could hear voices that I knew well, telling each other of the 'Wonderful Night' of the Saviour's birth, as I heard them a year before; and I assure you I was glad to shut my ears for a while and listen to the more familiar strains that came wandering to me halfway round the world."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "O Little Town of Bethlehem." FOREST GREEN. *The Hymnal 1982* (New York: Church Publishing, 1985), 78.

<sup>2</sup> "Notes on the Carol O Little Town of Bethlehem."  
[http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns\\_and\\_Carols/Notes\\_On\\_Carols/o\\_little\\_town\\_of\\_bethlehem.htm](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Notes_On_Carols/o_little_town_of_bethlehem.htm) [accessed December 23, 2024].

It's hard to do as Brooks suggests – that is, to shut our ears and listen – when the world around us is so very loud right now. The jangling of our collective anxiety over big-picture things like the future of the very planet, and smaller-scale things like how we will navigate the road of feasting and family gatherings and travel over the next several days, has a way of drowning out everything else. They especially silence our capacity to hear, and perceive, the good things that not only God, but other people, are doing, both large and small.

This is not the first time in our collective memories that we have arrived at Christmas with a world on edge. As a member of GenX, I tend to put things like the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the economic crash of 2007-8 in that category. Those who remember back to 1968 often describe it as the worst of times. It included traumatic events like the escalation of the Vietnam War; the assassinations of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy; race riots in seemingly every city from Washington, D.C. to Los Angeles; and a tense election season which saw Richard Nixon assume a Presidency which would end in disgrace during his second term. And yet, in the middle of all of that, there was a bright spot. On Christmas Eve, the crew of Apollo 8 became the first humans to orbit the moon. With that single accomplishment, they managed to get the attention of anyone who had access to a radio or television. Roughly one out of every four people on Earth tuned in to see and hear what the crew had seen: our fragile and beautiful planet, as it really is: a pale blue dot of an oasis in the middle of the vast black ocean of space.

For that famous Christmas Eve broadcast from lunar orbit, the crew, Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders, had been told only to "do something appropriate."

What they settled on was reading from the first chapter of Genesis, which starts: "In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth..." The way the engineers who were on duty that night in Mission Control describe that moment, it was one of wonder. It seemed to them that the whole world paused for one moment and breathed together as the three astronauts in turn repeated the phrase, "and God saw that it was good." Before his death earlier this year, Frank Borman, the flight's commander, often told a story about a telegram he and his crewmates received after they returned home. It read simply, "Thank you guys. You saved 1968." In the middle of all the turmoil of that year, at least one person had found a reason to have hope – hope that despite it all, humanity could still pull itself together in witness to something miraculous.

Christmas reminds us that hope is not lost. Even when things are not going so well, God keeps God's promises. It's not always done in the way or the timeframe we humans think it should be, but it is done. That God chooses to act through ordinary things like the arrival of a new baby, and then to make the news of this birth known first to a group of shepherds – not their bosses or even those in authority – gives hope to the down and out, those who struggle or who are suffering, or who look at what's going on in the world and can't help but feel hopeless. It sends a clear message to all who have ears to hear it: God not only sees the world, but is in the world, and God is willing to go to any length necessary demonstrate how much God loves each and every one of us.

That the world is a messy place is nothing new – and neither is God's involvement in helping humanity do the hard work of cleaning up after itself. That's what this day is about: hope, having come among us in the form of a newborn boy swaddled tightly and sleeping peacefully in a cow's feed box. This child is the embodiment of the

light shining in the land of deep darkness, and of the promise that God will never leave us to face trouble alone. For a son has been given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.