

Sermons at St. Paul's

A Wellspring of Spiritual Nourishment; A River of Service in Jesus' Name

April 3, 2010, The Great Easter Vigil
The Reverend Nancy Burton Dilliplane

In the name of our Risen Lord, Amen.

A new fire, a paschal candle, warm breezes, glorious music, a riot of flowers, choruses of alleluias...everything around me tells me that it is Easter. So why, tonight of all nights, do I have a Christmas carol stuck in my head?

Maybe it's all these weeks of looking up at Phillips Brooks, there in the top right hand corner of the reredos. It's Easter I just can't seem to get his hymn *O Little Town of Bethlehem* out of my head!

Or maybe it's because the words—**“In the dark streets shineth the ever-lasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight”**—seem to sum up THIS night—the vigil of Christ's *resurrection*, every bit as much as they sum up the vigil of Christ's *birth*.

At Christ's birth, the fears of the darkness of the world and of our own lives met the hope of Emmanuel, God with us. And the eternal Word became flesh and dwelt among us. God. With us. Here, among us as a human being. Hope was born that night. Hope that creation would be mended because her Creator was now a *part* of her. Hope triumphed over fear that night because God was with us.

But then again, swaddled with the hope of that Christ child was also the fear of what His birth portended, of everything that incarnation meant. Mortality. Death. The birth of that baby also presaged something unspeakably fearful—that the Son of God would one day die. In choosing human birth, God also chose human death. And what would happen then? What would happen to us if...God.....died. Oh yes, Phillips Brooks was right: hope and fear met in *that* Bethlehem night alright.

And the feared day did come. Christ died a criminal's death on the cross. We gathered here on Good Friday to remember that day—the day that the Son of God died and was buried. For these last long hours we have had to face again the fear of all the years—that God is *not* with us. Where is hope when God is dead?

But we gather here *tonight*, because, despite Good Friday's fearsome ending, we are a people of unquenchable hope. We believe against all probability that God is *still* with us. We are *the* people of hope because the stone has been rolled back, the tomb is empty and Christ is with us still.

Sorry Phillips Brooks, but it is really on *this* night that the hopes and fears of all the years are met. And as we gather together to light our candles in the darkness and to tell our old, old stories

we remember that we, God's people, have been here before. Light and darkness, promise and threat, freedom and slavery, feasting and hunger, fountain and thirst, belonging and exile, healing and brokenness, life and death always meet on this night.

As they always meet in the lives of the faithful. Faith must always answer the question of hope and fear. Which way will the meeting go? Light or darkness? Promise or threat? Freedom or slavery? Feast or fast? Life or death? We gather this night because it is *hope* we meet this dark Easter morning, not fear.

We turn once more to the stories of salvation history. The stories of God's acting for God's people. In our stories, it is always life that carries the day. As we gather to tell our old stories, we acknowledge all the times that hope and fear have met and that hope has prevailed. Our old stories are the basis of hope for our present stories as well. We gather this night because in our own lives hope and fear continue to meet, life and death continue to hang in the balance. We gather this night because we belong to a God who brings life out of death and calls us to lean in the direction of hope and life.

When we tell the terrible story of Abraham and Isaac, we acknowledge that God's promises of new and unending life are *always* under threat, often in ways that seem to make no sense. We hold our breath as the promised child is moments from death and we sigh with relief when God intervenes, the ram appears in the bushes and Isaac is safe again. The story tells us that God is faithful to God's promises. Life and death have met and life has won out.

Isaac's story is also our story. We live in a world where the children who are our promise and our future are under constant threat—from abuse, from hunger, from homelessness, from disease, from poverty. Yet hope holds fear at bay. And because of that hope, we God's people say over and over, "Stop. Do not lay your hand on these children or do anything to them." In our faithfulness, we lean into the hope that God's promise of life is for all children, not just for Isaac.

When we tell the story of Israel's deliverance from Pharaoh through the Red Sea, we acknowledge that something is always pursuing us. But that God is always leading us as well. When the waters close behind the people of God, we dance along with Miriam to find ourselves delivered and on firm ground. The story reassures us that those who follow God will be led out of danger and set free.

Israel's story is also our story. We walk a perilous and muddy path between the chaos of wars and terrorism, of a fragile economy and debt and unemployment and foreclosure. And all the while we are pursued by the enemy armies of hatred and fear and blame that would so easily enslave us. Yet hope holds fear at bay so that we God's people choose to follow after God, pursuing peace and justice in the midst of chaos. We lean into the hope of freedom from all that enslaves us.

Zephaniah's beautiful words about refuge and restoration and victory spoke hope to the remnant of Israel, returning home to a Jerusalem that lay in ruins. And today they are a hope filled promise to us, and to the remnant of the Haitian people who are still digging out from under the rubble of January's earthquake.

God's promise that "no one shall make you afraid" has yet to come true for so many in our world: riders on the Moscow subway, or residents of Palestinian cities, or merchants in Philadelphia's Galleria. But our hope holds fear at bay and we lean into the hope that exile and brokenness can and will be replaced by welcome and wholeness.

Paul's letter to the Romans reminds us that living as a people of hope is not easy. We lean towards hope in the presence of the same powers of darkness that nailed the One we follow to a cross. Our hope requires death. At least the death of our fearful selves. And in that dying we become free. Paul reminds the Romans and us, that Christ has been raised from the dead and will never die again. So we also must consider ourselves dead. Dead to fear and alive to hope.

And that's what tonight is all about. It is much more than a bunch of wax and wicks in the darkness. Is it much more than a recital of old stories and pretty poetry. It is about daring to believe that God has overcome fear, darkness, and death itself in order to be with us and to call us to new hope. It is about finding the risen Christ at the heart of each meeting of hope and fear, and with him, leaning into the hope.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in *us* tonight. We have come this night, in the midst of the fear of the darkness of the world and of our own lives. And against that fear we've lit a new fire, we've been reminded of God's utter faithfulness to the promise of restoring of creation, we've entered once again the waters of baptism, dying to the old and rising to new life. We've gone to the tomb and found death itself destroyed.

We are God's continuing story of salvation. We are the place where hope meets fear, freedom meets slavery, welcome meets exile, healing meets brokenness, life meets death. We are the bearers of hope.

We have come together this night in hope to break bread and discover once more that the Risen One is in our midst and that things which were cast down are being raised up, and things which had grown old are being made new, and that all things are being brought to perfection by their creator.

We have come to the meeting of hope and fear this night to proclaim our hope. And to cry to the dark streets of Bethlehem and Philadelphia and to heaven above the source of our hope. Christ is risen! The Lord is risen indeed! Alleluia.