

“God with Us”
Christmas Eve Meditation shared by Carla Pratt Keyes
at Ginter Park Presbyterian Church, Richmond, VA
December 24, 2011

Sylvia Plath is best known for poems full of rage and despair Such emotions are real on any night – even in response to the first Christmas. Recall King Herod, and the havoc he wrought as he raged about the birth of Jesus Remember: victims of tyrants and violence in every age . . . people starving, lonely, afraid . . . Christians in places like Pakistan – under threat tonight as they gather for worship. The poet, Sylvia Plath, suffered from depression she could not control. She was so *full* of despair, Plath took her own life (and with her children in the house!).

Strange place to begin a Christmas Eve mediation. Perhaps. But if the news of this night does not illumine a darkness such as Plath’s, then it isn’t good enough! Or . . . we have not understood it properly.

A few of Plath’s poems shine with hope worthy of Christmas. I’ve been wanting to read you one called “Black Rook in Rainy Weather.” Plath wrote:

On the stiff twig up there
Hunches a wet black rook
Arranging and rearranging its feathers in the rain.
I do not expect a miracle
Or an accident

To set the sight on fire
In my eye, nor seek
Any more in the desultory weather some design,
But let spotted leaves fall as they fall,
Without ceremony, or portent.

Although, I admit, I desire,
Occasionally, some backtalk
From the mute sky, I can’t honestly complain:
A certain minor light may still
Lean incandescent

Out of kitchen table or chair
As if a celestial burning took
Possession of the most obtuse objects now and then –
Thus hallowing an interval
Otherwise inconsequent

By bestowing largesse, honor,
One might say love. At any rate, I now walk

Wary (for it could happen
Even in this dull, ruinous landscape); skeptical,
Yet politic; ignorant

Of whatever angel may choose to flare
Suddenly at my elbow. I only know that a rook
Ordering its black feathers can so shine
As to seize my senses, haul
My eyelids up, and grant

A brief respite from fear
Of total neutrality. With luck,
Trekking stubborn through this season
Of fatigue, I shall
Patch together a content

Of sorts. Miracles occur,
If you care to call those spasmodic
Tricks of radiance miracles. The wait's begun again,
The long wait for the angel,
For that rare, random descent.

This year, as I have thought about the miracle of Christmas, I have been especially drawn to the ways a “celestial burning” can hallow the people, the things, the moments of our lives, making them shine with – well – heavenly light. Largesse . . . honor . . . One might say love. It happens, I think, more often than we notice. That it happens at all is God’s gift to us.

“[Jesus] was just a baby, with tiny fingers clutching his daddy’s pinky.”¹ He was born in Bethlehem, a modest village outside the better-known, more impressive Jerusalem. The prophet Micah spoke of both – the *baby*, born in *Bethlehem* – as reason for hope. “*In the midst of bad things great things shall come from small things.*” That is one way to read Micah’s promise. “Where you least expect to see the power of God demonstrated in a corrupt and demonic world, there you will find God working out [God’s] purpose” in the small and ordinary stuff of earth.²

Peter Gomes once wrote that on Christmas

we are reminded that the greatness of God is seen in the wonder both of the ordinary and of the small; the miracle of God, [God’s] divine economy, is that God can make much of nothing and something of almost anything. A little town becomes the focus of the world’s last best hope; a little baby comes to oppose the

¹ A sentence I borrow from the Rev. Tom Are.

² Peter Gomes, “House of Bread,” in *Sermons: Biblical Wisdom for Daily Living*, 2002. 23-24.

forces of Caesar and fear; and human flesh and human life are dignified and made whole as never before

[Gomes says that] Christmas belongs to people who [are lucky enough or wise enough to recognize the *real presence* of God] in their lives and in the world, not simply once upon a time long ago and far away but *here and now*, inhabiting our hearts and struggling with us against the tangible realities that surround us. The world of Bethlehem was real [says Gomes], Caesar Augustus was real, Herod was real, taxation was real, death and slaughter were real, despair was real and normal; and in the midst of all of this God had to be made real, and was made real not in an ideal but in the flesh, for that is what the Incarnation was and is, and that is why we bow before its presence. [*“God with us.”* It is not just a translation of the Hebrew name *Emmanuel*. “God with us” is a translation of the living, loving purpose of God to be present in and among God’s creation. God does not abandon that which God makes. *Does not abandon any of us* – to fear, or despair, or even death. God becomes *one with us*, that *we* may become one with God.]³

All around us are signs that this is true – signs of God’s love hallowing our lives. Respite from fear. Glimpses of glory. Incarnate encounters. All around.

Earlier this month I attended a Christmas party that churches in this neighborhood hosted for the residents of adult homes nearby. As most of you know, the residents of these homes all suffer from some kind of mental disability They can’t live on their own, and these homes provide them a safe – if somewhat dismal – place to be. Parties like this one are a treat. There was (as is custom) an impromptu Christmas pageant at the gathering that night. My son and I helped to dress the shepherds in earth-toned bathrobes and warm hats. But one of the ladies we dressed – a shepherd named Thomasine – glimpsed the angel-dressing-table with its gold and silvery things. She asked if she might have something sparkly. Why not? A shepherd with a halo. Some glitter amidst the gray. Thomasine aglow with heavenly light.

She was the angel flaring at my elbow that night – random as they come . . . but not so rare, I would argue. She was no accident or miracle for me – just a reminder of the ways that *God hallows each of us* – as God is born to us and in us. We do shine with divine light. We travel with heavenly companions. We face the tangible realities of this life – good and bad things, both – with great blessings concealed in humble packages . . . small signs that God is working God’s purposes out. The wait – the long wait – is over: *God is with us*. In a baby – tiny fingers clutching his mother’s breast. In a town – small in size, awash in prophecy. But *here and now* as well. In this time. In this place. In one another. God has become one with us that we might become one with God.

God is with us. Never more so, perhaps, than when we gather around this table to feast with Christ on these ordinary elements of bread and juice, body and blood. As Peter Gomes also wrote:

³ Gomes.

Every time a baby is born . . . God endorses [the] world; and every time we celebrate Holy Communion we experience once again God's Incarnation. The miracle of Christmas: What is it? Is it the star, the singing angels, the wondering shepherds, the lovely mother, the exotic kings? Is it the cold night, the hopes and fears? Not really. The miracle of Christmas is that God cared enough to send the very best, and that God continues to do so in the gifts now given to us in one another.⁴

⁴ Gomes, 25.