

**The Hopes and Fears of all the Years
Are Met in Thee Tonight**

'O Little Town of Bethlehem'

Hymn #165, Micah 5:2-5a, and Luke 1:39-45

We talked about hopes and fears
at our Bible study on Friday night.

I want to talk about the hopes first.

The order in which Phillips Brooks placed these words
in his wonderful carol seem to me significant.

Most of us would start with the negative,
with the fears,
with what's going wrong,
with the problems we face in this world.

And most of us would get stuck there,
overwhelmed by the power these problems seem to have.
We would let those the problems we fear define reality for us.
The darkness of the night surrounding us
would be the only thing we see.
These problems would easily take over our feelings and perceptions.
This world would be seen as threatening and we as full of fears.
The only reasonable things to do
seem to be to huddle in fear
or seek to escape.

But that is not where Brooks starts in this beloved carol.
He talks about hopes first.
As I said, I think that is significant.

Phillips Brooks was an Episcopalian clergymen
who serve congregations in Philadelphia and Boston
in the latter half of the 1800s.

This was a period of rapid change in American cities –
rapid growth in population from rural and foreign immigration,
economic fluctuations affecting employment and prosperity,
new social problems emerging in crowded urban tenements,
and wars ripping the nation and the world apart.

Lots of reasons, in other words, to be filled with fears.

But as Brooks reflected on the town in which God took flesh,
in which Jesus Christ was born,
he started with hopes rather than fears.

The power of this Christmas story,
being retold centuries later,
filled his heart yet again with hope.

That hope came in quiet and humble ways,
in a baby born in a stable in the still of the night
to a young carpenter and his wife.
That baby came into a world of darkness and fear
as a wondrous gift given by God,
the gift of God's self,
God coming to be with us,
imparting himself into our hearts,
born in us to abide with us,
Emmanuel.

That is the power of this hope, as Brooks sees it,
the power of God's love being with us in an everlasting way.

Here's what we agreed we hoped for on Friday evening:
health; prosperity; environmental healing;
spiritual strength, fibre, and confidence;
a good future;
reconciliation in conflicts of all sorts,
broken marriages, racial and religious tensions,
and national rivalries;
the assurance that God is with us as supporter and guide;
the courage to make positive changes;
and the capacity to model being a loving community
here at Brentwood.

We hoped, in our own words, for the Reign of God,
for life shaped by the influence of the presence of God with us,
with the promises of God we read of in Micah being fulfilled,
promises of strength, peace, and security.

If we are to be God's people,
the ones in whom Jesus Christ remains embodied in the world,
the beloved friends of God sharing his love,
then we must keep this hope at the heart of our lives.

We must be confident that the light that came into the world in Jesus
will never be extinguished,
no matter how dark and fearful the dreads of sin appear to get.

The power of light that came into the world on that first Christmas
in that quiet little town in Judea
is imparted into our hearts
and shines through our lives.

That is the gift of strength for service
that lies at the heart of Christmas
for Christians.

This is the hope of all the years
that came to Bethlehem that night
to lighten the darkness of the world,
to dispel the fears that gripped the world then and now.

But the fears are real.
They cannot be ignored.
They help us pay attention to the problems
to which faith, hope, and love are to be applied.

On Friday, we identified the following fears that concerned us:
unemployment; dying; sickness; loneliness;
catastrophes; violence and criminal activities;
war; global warming and environmental destruction;
addictions and neglect in families;
the seeming ease with which families fall apart;
and how focused our society seems to be on 'ME'.

You will have your own fears to add to the list.

What Brooks reminds us of in this beloved carol
is that hope trumps all those fears
and ultimately defines reality for us.

Hope is the lens through which Christians see the world,
no matter how dark and dreadful the fears
are that surround them.

Imparted into our hearts
is the light of Jesus Christ,
Emmanuel,
God with us and for us.

The light of that hope cannot be extinguished.

David Brooks is a columnist for the *New York Times* and a frequent commentator on political and economic affairs to several radio and TV channels. He was recently interviewed on the power of stories. Here's part of what he said:

The most important power we have is the power to help select the lens through which we see reality.

It is a matter of choosing, of selecting,
the story you will live by.
For Christians, that story is one of hope, not fear.
When the hopes and fears of all the years
met in Bethlehem that night
two millennia ago,
hope won, hands down.

It was not a flashy victory,
no great battles or noisy clashes or fanfares of triumph.
It was a humble child entering into human hearts
and creating there a home for God
and a powerhouse for the energy of God's Reign.

This energy of hope brings the strength to build peace and security
in every corner of this world –
within individuals, among friends, throughout families,
in communities, within and among nations.
This energy of hope makes it possible to flourish in the midst of fear
and eventually dispel the dark of dread
and replace it with the light of love.

That is the enlightening story that we Christians celebrate at Christmas,
that we invite people to select as their guiding light,
that we ourselves choose to live by
in the midst of all the fears that beset us and our neighbours.

We pay attention to those fears
to discover where the attention of our hope needs to be directed.
And as we direct our hope and faith and love
to those areas of need,
we know we walk in God's grace and power
as Christ's continuing presence in the world.