

St. Joseph of Arimathea

Episcopal Church

2172 Sawmill River Road

White Plains, Greenburg,

New York 10607

Christmas Mass

December 24, 2019

A Sermon by the Rev. Joe Parrish

“Silent Night”

DRAFT

The Holy Gospel according to

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a

manger.” And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary

treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Dear Lord, come to us this night in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

Once there was a little girl named Henrietta, Hety, for short. Hety hated Christmas. There was too much noise, too much disorder, too much excitement. She didn't like the Christmas tree lights which often didn't work; she didn't like the mess of Christmas wrappings all around the floor;

Hety didn't exactly like all the Christmas carols, or the snow and mud tramped into the house and the disappointment with the Christmas presents, even though she usually received almost everything she had asked for; and Hety did not like that her parents and brothers and sisters lost their tempers very quickly during Christmas. (Hety never lost her temper, well not very often anyhow.). Why, she demanded, did Jesus have to come at Christmas time? Couldn't he have chosen a day when everyone is more relaxed? Why did he not come a time when it was easy to pray and not a time when everyone was running around like

crazy people? But, her mother said, ‘Hety, Christmas means Christ Mass, the Mass on Our Lord’s birthday.’ Oh, said Hety, pondering this truth. ‘Well,’ she said, ‘OK, but then why does it have to be *during the holidays*’? Her mother admitted that it was a very good question.”

[This story is a slight adaptation from the writing of Roman Catholic priest and writer, Andrew Greeley in 2005:

<https://www.agreeley.com/hom05/dec25.html>]

One young couple in my medical school class in Antigua is about to have a baby. And in anticipation of this grand event, a

friend of theirs held a baby shower near where we live. But some of the other students who were invited did not know how to find where the baby shower was being held. So, another friend texted the mom-to-be in our ‘group chat’ and said, “can you please ‘pin’ where the party is being held?” “Pin” for those who are not so ‘google savy’, ‘pin’ is how one marks on a google map exactly where a place is on planet earth—it sets the exact longitude and latitude of a place. That’s what the writer of Luke’s gospel was doing in non-computer language in around 110 AD as this story is being written down for the very first time

ever. The writer of Luke “pins” the place and the time and the setting of Jesus’ birth. Apparently, Matthew’s gospel from twenty five years earlier did not give readers enough detail, and the early second century people wanted more details, more of the local ‘color’ about the shepherds in the field near Bethlehem, more about how an angel host was involved. Thus, most of the cherished stories about Christmas were ‘born’, or, rather, ‘written down’ for the first time in the account we read every Christmas Eve, the beginning of the second chapter of the Gospel according to Luke.

Christmas was in disarray nearly from the beginning, or was it so at the very beginning? Sometime around 400 AD the Arian theologian Asterius from Syria preached a marvelous denunciation of holiday gift-giving. (400 AD!) The first recorded Christ Mass dates from 354 AD, and the first Christmas sermon we still have dates from 361 AD in Northern Africa. Pope Gregory the Great is cited as having instituted the Christ Mass feast in 379, though my seminary liturgy professor Thomas Talley, suggested that Pope Gregory only served as chief presider of a feast established earlier.

Somehow Christmas in the United States started out on the wrong foot. Bill Bryson in his cleverly researched book, “Made in America,” tells the following story.

“Christmas...got off to an erratic start in America, not least because the Puritans disdained it, regarding it (not altogether inaccurately) as a pagan festival. In 1659, the Puritans went so far as to *ban* it, and it remained widely suppressed in New England into the 1800's. So, partly because of this interruption of tradition, Christmas as we celebrate it now is a mongrel accumulation of practices from many lands.

Gift-giving, which has no intrinsic connection with Christmas, we borrowed from Holland (with probably some influence from the wisemen, magi, on Epiphany).

From the Middle Ages, the Dutch had made a custom of giving presents to children on December 6, St. Nicholas Day. St. Nicholas was a shadowy figure from Asia Minor whose many kindly deeds included bestowing bags of gold on three young women who otherwise faced a life of prostitution. Over time these three bags evolved into three golden balls and became, by some complicated leap of logic, the three balls associated with pawnbroking. (In

some European countries, gift giving is still on December 6 and not December 25.) In the late eighteenth century, St. Nicholas and the presents that went with him were borrowed from the Dutch [and were then] transferred to the nearest Anglican holiday, December 25. At the same time, the now wholly secular figure of Santa Claus became bizarrely bound up with ‘Christkindlein,’ the Christ child, and thus took on the alternative designation, ‘Kris Kringle.’ The Christmas tree and the practice of sending greeting cards arrived from Germany--they are often attributed to Queen Victoria's German consort, Prince Albert--and [the Christmas

tree and greeting cards] gradually became part of the Christmas tradition in the nineteenth century. The first mention of a Christmas tree in America is not until 1846, about 170 years ago. Carols..., mistletoe, holly, and the yule log all come from Britain, mostly as survivors of a pre-Christian past. [The word,] ‘Yule’, itself is pre-Saxon Germanic and evidently commemorates a forgotten pagan festival. The American attitude toward Christmas and how to celebrate it was long ambivalent. On the one hand, Macy's was staying open till midnight on Christmas Eve as far back as 1867 [two years after the Civil War] in order

to deal with the clamor to buy presents; on the other hand, the practice of decorating trees was so late in developing that even in 1880 a manufacturer of ornaments could persuade F.W. Woolworth to take no more than \$25 of his ornament stock. (Before the decade was out, however, [by 1890, about a hundred and thirty years ago,] Woolworth had upped the order [for Christmas ornaments] to \$800,000.) Eighteen years ago, Walmart sold 1.25 billion worth of goods in one day; today they sell probably over \$3 billion a day, and likely during the Christmas season, well over \$5 billion in a single day, more than 200 million times

more in a single day than the original F.W. Woolworth sold in a whole year. And that's just Walmart...

But not to emphasize the world's values, tonight was originally more of a quiet time. Sure, a myriad of angel voices praised God in the highest in the hearing of the Bethlehem shepherds, but it was the lowing of sheep that was more of the background sound, not the horn blowing around the shopping malls of today. Into the midst of the hubbub of Christmas comes this final little historic story: on Christmas Eve in about the year 1815, two hundred years ago, a small village German church organ went

completely silent shortly before the Christmas service was to begin. The assistant pastor, Joseph Mohr, realized something needed to be done to rescue their Christmas Eve service from complete musical silence. So, Joseph Mohr went to the church organist, Franz Xaver Gruber, to find a way around the problem. Together quickly Mohr penned the words and Gruber developed the melody of a new hymn on the church piano. This rapidly conceived new hymn would become one of the most famous of all Christmas carols, born in difficulty, birthed by the Holy Spirit, bringing a reflection of the light first shown

to the shepherds by the multitude of the heavenly host on the first Christmas Eve. The hymn is called “Silent Night” which we will sing this very night while kneeling after our Christmas Communion is completed. It is to remind us that even in the seeming silence of our thoughts, Christ is with us, comforting us, relieving us of our burdens, lifting the weight of the world from our shoulders. Our Lord has come. He has come indeed to you and to me. We are the beneficiaries of all who have gone before us. We are in the victory train that extends throughout all eternity, because we are the

ones who have Jesus Christ as our Lord and Master.

Let our hearts be glad tonight. On this Silent Night our Lord has come to be with us forever!

Amen.

Description: The shepherds in the field harken to the solemnness of the original Christmas Eve. The only sound was possibly the bleating of sheep and goats, but suddenly the heavenly host burst forth in praise of the new Savior born to save us all.

Tags: Christ, Jesus, child, born, manger,
Walmart, Woolworth, sales, honking,
Christmas, silent, night, bread, tradition,
Europe, Holland, German, hymn, organ,
piano, holiday

Other illustrations:

08 Marc Kolden, Luther Northwestern
Theological Seminary, wrote:

Some years ago, at McCosh's used book store near the University of Minnesota, the rather cynical proprietor put a sign in his store window in early December that said, "Put the X back in Xmas." Though he did not intend it, perhaps he put it correctly: put the X back in Christmas, i.e., put the cross back in Christmas. Tell the whole story. The birth of Jesus never saved anyone.

07 Yet isn't God's very nature to be caring for all, from the lowest to the highest? And if God hasn't experienced the lowest, how can God be expected really to

understand all of us? The homeless God understands homelessness. The homeless God had no 211 to dial for shelter on a cold night. God's relationship to humanity, God's identity with the lowest of humanity becomes a key point for our salvation. We can never be too low for God to care. We can never be too outcast for Jesus to love us. We can never be too uncared for that God can't swaddle us in God's mighty arms, clutch as if our very lives were at stake, nurture us, care for us, feed us, clothe us, but especially swaddle us as the most loving parent would clutch its baby to its very heart.

Tonight God's heart is breaking for someone. God's heart is breaking for you in your need. God's heart is reaching out to you to care for you, to let you know how much God does indeed want to meet you exactly where you are tonight.

God died for us to let us know how much God cares for us. God went to the cross to show us how much God loves you and me. Nothing could prevent God from reaching out and touching you this very sacred night, except for our own hardness of heart that may want to withdraw from God's comforting hand.

Let God hold you tonight. Hear God's call to you to come cuddle in God's arms. Listen to God's Spirit cooing in your ear, warming you, blessing you, saving you. And let God be your God tonight and forever more. Let God's Savior of the world be your Savior.

07 A careful reading of the Lukan text and the writings of Jewish historian Josephus reveals a hitherto unrecorded prior census in about 5 or 6 BC, just before the death of King Herod. And it is now thought by several scholars that that census was the one being cited in the gospel, which uprooted families far and wide, including

Joseph and his pregnant wife Mary, and set the stage for the later great unpleasantries that twelve years later unseated Quirinius as governor when he forced the second registration, the registration which may possibly have been part of the setting of Jesus' family's journey to Jerusalem when Jesus was twelve years of age. Jerusalem would have been a popular stopping off place between Bethlehem and Jesus' adopted hometown of Nazareth in Galilee.

So even if things do not always seem to go just right, let the little baby's heavenly Father hear our prayers. That baby's Father

is God. And God can do anything for us. We just need to pray. We have to let God do for us what God sees is best. We may not get exactly what we want. God is not quite Santa Claus. We can keep making our lists and expecting God to check them twice. But God always will be there to look after us and help us in our times of need. We do not have to be afraid. God will do the very best thing for us. We just have to trust God. Isn't it good we have a Savior who looks down on us every minute of every day? He will keep us safe forever. Amen.

At a London society event honoring the birthday of Sir Robert Moyer, Lady Cooper thought the person speaking to her knew an awfully lot about her. And finally, when she realized the person decked out in a myriad of diamonds was Queen Elizabeth, she exclaimed, “Oh, ma’am, I’m so sorry. I didn’t recognize you without your crown.” Only lowly shepherds recognized the little Savior of humankind lying in the manger; he was not yet wearing the crown of glory he now has in heaven.

02 Christmas is becoming politically incorrect; Christmas is becoming politically

incorrect. In the state of Vermont school children can now say “Happy Holidays” but not “Merry Christmas” in school. The state of Arizona has banned nativity scenes, decorated trees, Santa Claus, and the Star of David from public office space. In Stillwater, Minnesota, teachers are not allowed to wear Christmas sweaters. In New York City, nativity scenes have been banned from public schools and other public buildings, but menorahs and the Muslim star and crescent are acceptable. Kensington, Maryland, initially banned Santa Claus from the annual tree lighting ceremony last year, but he was reinstated when protesters began

to plan a “million-Santa march” in that Maryland community. In Newton County, Georgia, the word “Christmas” was removed from all school calendars to avoid a threatened lawsuit of the American Civil Liberties Union. Christmas has become quite a controversial festival.

06 What do you remember about your first Christmas? I don't recall my first Christmas, but I have seen pictures my parents took of me crawling on the floor under a big decorated Christmas tree with a large wooden Dalmatian dog toy that could be pulled around and that sort of barked as it

moved. I actually think I heard it quack more than I heard it bark, but toys are toys! And maybe it distorted my opinion of dogs and ducks forever, I don't know!

04 Christmas gifts have become the symbol of our celebration of this sacred day. But sometimes we have gone overboard I think. A new friend of mine e-mailed me a note about his six-year-old granddaughter who was a star competitive athlete but who became quite ill recently. She is a very bright girl and experienced a healing after we had prayed for her. Then she had the inspiration that she would celebrate

Christmas this year by helping children who had nothing. So, she has given a lot of the prize money she had earned in her athletic competitions to needy kids this Christmas, buying toys, food, and so forth. And next year she and her grandfather are going to adopt a complete family and supply everything for their Christmas. He told me he used to do that himself a long time ago and remarked that it was always the best experience he ever had on Christmas Eve.

03 So what was God thinking when God sent his only son to earth to be born of a woman, that many testify was a virgin.

Wouldn't that make little Jesus a freak of nature? But the writer of the gospel of Luke affirms all these things as being factual.

That God actually sent his only Son to be born a live baby here on planet earth. Now there are about a hundred million stars in each galaxy and at last count about a hundred million galaxies, and assuming at least a hundred objects orbiting around each star, the probabilities of Christ being born right here on this planet are enormously small, no more than one in ten to the eighteenth power, that is one divided by one with eighteen zeros after it, an exceedingly small number. The probabilities of this birth

are almost, but not quite, infinitely small. So, the word “improbable” is probably defined by this event. Yet the improbability of humankind is no deterrence to a mighty and everlasting God. God indeed made everything out of exactly nothing--so why not a baby from the womb of a virgin mother? It all adds up, in a way.

11 One recent Christmas a church in the suburbs of Sydney, Australia, decided to do something to help the crowds of shoppers who trudged past their doors each day. As an act of kindness, they provided free tea and coffee and a place to sit and catch one's

breath. Many worn out shoppers took advantage of the refreshments offered there in Sydney, Australia. But the nearby coffee shops got very angry. And the Chamber of Commerce wrote to the church objecting to what they were doing, on the basis that, quote, “giving something away for free was not in the spirit of Christmas,” end quote.

01 The second thing about the birth announcement of Christ’s coming that strikes me is that the time it took out of the lives of the shepherds and wise men was time well spent. It is good to worship for a time and get our hearts again tuned to God’s

message for us. We oftentimes don't take time simply to hear God speaking to us on a regular basis, and we wonder why our lives seem so chaotic and vacant. We need to turn back to a full life of worship and adoration, and not make coming to church just a once a year thing. The time we offer in praise and thanksgiving to God is infinitely valuable and must not be skipped.

12 Nicky Gumbel, the developer of our Alpha course and the Vicar who arranged for the ordination of the new Archbishop of Canterbury, tells the story of an orthodox Jew, an intellectual in England, who says he

has no trouble believing in the virgin birth of Jesus, but he cannot believe that the death of Jesus was an atonement for our sins. Some writer has noted that it is not the birth of Christ which saves us, but it is Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice to lift the burden of sin from all who believe in him as Lord and Savior. We announce with the angels today that Christ was born in a manger in Bethlehem, and we rush to see him still, even though that miracle was two thousand years ago. We cannot get enough of the amazement over how God chose us for his dwelling place, one planet out of trillions. And what is the likelihood you

would hear this wonderful story? Four billion now living on earth still haven't heard or at least still haven't come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah, the Savior of the world. So if at any time you do not feel you are special in God's eyes, remember God chose your planet to come in bodily form, and God has chosen you to hear the miraculous story of the birth of God's only Son. Billions of others are not so fortunate. But you are, you are the apple of God's eye, God's eye is upon the sparrow, and I know he watches over you and me. Whether we live or die, we cannot know the time we have, but today is a gift of immense

importance, so please let us give God the praises God deserves for choosing us. Is it not easy to join the heavenly chorus of angels giving God all praise and glory today?

00 A few years ago I returned to the church one evening after supper and found a young girl sitting on the guardrail behind the church, the one that divides our property from that of the big Municipal Parking Lot. She had a covered baby carriage beside her, and in it was a young infant. I struck up a conversation with her and learned her boyfriend's mother had kicked her out of

their house after some altercation had occurred with the girl's boyfriend. I asked her how she was going to get a place to stay for the night, fully expecting the answer I would get. She had no money and no idea of how to get a room. She had been able to get a friend to take in another somewhat older child who had been evicted with her, but that person was unable to take in her and her baby for the night. So, I took her to get a room at the motel off Elizabeth Avenue that used to be used by the city police to house people in an emergency, back when the police could get Welfare to permit them to do such things. I knew from prior

experience that this particular motel would take a church check for a room. I quizzed the young girl about her plans to seek help and urged her to get to City Welfare first thing the next morning. Fortunately, the weather was mild at that time. I followed up with Welfare and the girl the next morning and found she had indeed been admitted to a room at the YWCA. After some time, she and her baby got back home with the boyfriend. I think of her when I think of Joseph, Mary, and the baby lying in the manger. They too were homeless vagabonds. Joseph was a bit more responsible than the Elizabeth girl's

boyfriend and his mother. But housing was just as much a problem for poor travelers then as it is today. I am still haunted by the recollection of a mother and two children huddled shivering in the entryway of the Parish Hall in 1989 right before the Christmas Eve service, the first year I was at St. John's Church. At that time, I had no idea of what to do for them. We had no room in our inn, so to speak. And I did not know where there was a manger, as though I would ever know. But indeed, there was such a place in the first century, perhaps somewhere back inside a cave, according to later legend. And in that cave the Christ

Child would be born and placed in a fodder trough for livestock. It would be difficult to come into the world in more humble circumstances.

00 May Christ be born anew within our own hearts this very day. Amen.

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Dwight Gunther wrote, “If our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator. If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist. If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist. But since our greatest need was forgiveness, God sent us a Savior.”

12 Andrew Greeley writes: “Christmas is a festival of light, of the light of the world who came into the world and that the darkness could never put it out. It was a festival of light in ancient Rome, the Saturnalia (or Lupercalia as it was often called). But its roots are much deeper in human history. Humans had figured out long before they kept any records that this was the day when there was a little more light in the sky, winter as bad as it is, had not won, darkness was fading, and light was returning. So it is not an accident that the early Christians decided that it was a perfect

time to celebrate the coming of the true light of the world, of which the sun was only a pale symbol – for all its mighty power and our utter dependence on it. Hence in the ... masses of Christmas there are twenty references to light.



As John Shea says in his book *Starlight*, we discover at Christmas, not only the light that is God and the light that Jesus came to bring to the world, but the light that is and has always been in us because we are creatures who share in the light of God, beings in whom the spark of God's light and

love has always shone. <>Christmas reveals to us that like Mary and Joseph we too can be the light of the world and that indeed our own frail and often dim lights are not completely discontinuous from the light of Jesus, from the starlight that shone at Bethlehem. Christmas reveals to us that like Mary and Joseph we too can be the light of the world and that indeed our own frail and often dim lights are not completely discontinuous from the light of Jesus, from the starlight that shone at Bethlehem.

The birth of Jesus who was laid in a manger probably displaced a baby lamb who

normally would be laid there by nurturing shepherds in the area, a lamb who would eventually be prepared to be the annual sacrifice at the Passover feast. Thus, early on in his life Jesus becomes a symbol of “the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.”