
Christmas is a Heart-To-Heart Thing

A sermon by Bishop Robert C. Wright
Christmas Eve – Year A

In the Name of the God, Blessed, Brilliant and Benevolent. AMEN.

Good Evening and Merry Christmas! I greet you in the Name of Jesus of Nazareth. The one whose birth we celebrate tonight. And I bring greetings to you from the people of the Episcopal Church in Middle and North Georgia.

Just a couple of days ago, I had the good fortune of listening to some wonderful young people sing Christmas songs. Some of them were familiar songs, some new to my ears. For me, singing and listening to others sing, more than anything, thaws me out and moves me towards the address of joy.

They sang, those little ones, clapping and swaying. Some on beat, some on beat-ish. They sang, “The real meaning of Christmas ain’t about mistle...toe. The real meaning of Christmas ain’t about dashing through the snow. The real meaning of Christmas can’t be found in a toy. The real meaning of Christmas is Mary’s baby boy!”

Those words, as simple as they are, have stuck to me. I wake up to them. Christmas *is* about Mary’s baby boy. Her heart and his heart. Even our heart. Christmas is a heart to heart thing. Christmas reveals God’s heart. God loved the world so much God gave a son. God loved the world so much God left the gated community called heaven and came among us. God could have sent an army but God sent a baby. God sent a baby. A son. The consummation of God’s love for this world despite its mess. Love is outreach in a mess. Christmas is God’s heart to heart plea to have a heart! Why heart? Because God knows that logic and reason and might only go so far. If only logic, reason and might were necessary, there’d be no poverty and no hate. And with our great military might, we would have everything necessary to, “have a silent night...” and to “... sleep in heavenly peace.” But we don’t. What a great risk taken by God, knowing us. Knowing that our default position, like King Herod, is to ostracize or kill the things and the people who unsettle us. Christmas is a great risk taken by God to attempt to maybe, just maybe reach past our well defended hearts, our commitment to polite hostility and our convenient ignorance and get to the meaty part of our hearts. Maybe the news of Christmas comes first to poor people living outdoors because all they could afford was heart. Maybe the news of this baby comes first to flocks of sheep and not the corridors of power, because power corrodes hearts. Maybe this baby comes to the field first and not the temple because those people had more religion than heart. In Christmas, through Mary’s baby boy, we see God reaching out from God’s heart to the heart of all humanity. We see God keeping God’s heart open to us even as we reject him and harm one another.

Now, I wonder if you’re able, tonight, to take a step back? If you did, you might realize that some people will see our gathering here and in places like this all around the world and they will say, “what a glorious festival of sentimentalism. All this talk about babies and angelic choirs. What a beautiful diversion, from the real world. Have you people even heard of Aleppo? Beyond being a cute story and a boon to the economy, what is Christmas really worth?” Some people might say that...

Well to address all of that, let’s go to the source of all Christmas wisdom and answers, *A Charlie Brown Christmas!* And since we are in Atlanta, you might be edified to know Charlie Brown’s Christmas was commissioned and brought to the world in 1965 by the Coca-Cola Company. You know the story. Lucy suggests that Charlie Brown should direct a

Christmas play. But he wants something more than the status quo. More than a performance of seasonal sentiments. We watch him be frustrated. Maybe even a little depressed. He's almost ready to give in and forsake what his heart vaguely yearns for. Then in walks Linus. You remember Linus, Lucy's little brother? The one whose security blanket is always in hand. And you have to watch carefully as he speaks or you'll miss it. As he begins to recite the Christmas story, the music drops out and the spotlight focuses on him.

"And they were in that same country, shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And the angel of the Lord came upon them and the glory of the Lord shone round about them and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, fear not..."

And that's when you have to push pause right there. Right when he says, "fear not," an extraordinary thing happens: Linus throws down his blanket. I've watched for 50 years and never noticed. He never throws down his blanket. It's his security after all. But now it has been replaced by the Christmas story. The very thing he swore was essential was cast aside for something else. Something better. Someone better. He goes on to finish the story. His hands up, his face now smiling because of a joy that is released by the story. Not an incantation but an incarnation.

"Fear not, for I bring you good news of glad tidings that shall be for all people. And this shall be a sign for you, you will find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes 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, and on earth peace and good will to all people."

Sure some will dismiss what we do tonight as sentimentalism. But what Linus teaches us is: we need more Christmas, not less! The Christmas that God's heart desires. What Linus is experiencing and commending is the infectious heart of God. How it transcends cold logic and purges indifference. More Christmas, not less! Because, the Christmas story is fatal to fear and hatred, partisanship, and bigotry. More Christmas for America is what we need. Christmas strength to keep heart. Not a Kumbaya Christmas. But a God is near Christmas! And if God is near then I have to realize that you are my brother and my sister. In God's Christmas story, there's good news and glad tidings for all not just the upper middle class. I am talking about a Christmas dressed up like justice not like Santa Claus. What Aleppo needs is a Christmas where bombs and genocide are thrown down like Linus' blanket for something better. An Aleppo where soldiers wield shovels for building and not automatic weapons for obliterating. More Christmas... because our hearts are sick with sin and cynicism and broken with grief, fear and loss.

More Christmas because we live in a world abounding with civic ignorance. A world where the news has been weaponized. And incidentally, what is fake news anyway? When we were growing up, we were told telling anything but the truth was called lying. God's heart touching our heart, and our heart touching one another is what the heart of the world needs most. There is no situation or circumstance where more kindness, more love, or more justice would be detrimental. None! Think about it, the most revolutionary thing you and I could do or be from this night forward is to have more heart. Give more heart. To God and neighbor, especially stranger and enemy. Mary's baby boy comes among us a babe but grows and burst the boundaries of our hearts if we would just allow him. Sure we welcome the child but will we nurture him and give him room to grow up? That's what Jesus wants for Christmas, room. As in, "...let every heart prepare him room." Then as the song goes, when that happens, "heaven and nature will sing." That's a good definition right there for what it means to have faith: Faith is the willingness to regularly give God more of the square footage of your heart! Room. Space. That's the only real and reliable measure of spirituality...if we have more heart today than we had yesterday. If more people live in our heart today, than yesterday. Yes, God's open heart to us is medicine for our broken and frightened hearts. And a life with and for God and neighbor is the only true sense of security this world offers. As brother Linus found out, only God can take the cynical question marks at the end of our sad sentences and straighten them into triumphant exclamation points.

Now we are left with one final challenge from the Charlie Brown Christmas story. At the end of Linus' recitation, as his joy fades, he reaches again for his blanket. He reaches for the familiar. And this is where you and I must part ways with Linus. We can't come to this place on this night and experience only a temporary heart recitation. Christmas shouldn't be a fleeting positive cardiac episode. Before we leave here tonight. As we prepare to reenter the world that God loves so much, maybe we could pray a Christmas prayer. Maybe we could pledge to God that we intend to leave the false securities of the world behind. Maybe we could tell God, I hear your heart to heart appeal to have heart. And I am willing. Maybe we could pray, God unfold my heart like a flower before the sun. If Christmas is about Mary's baby boy, as the school children sang, then Christmas is about a heart that loves. And a love never leaves us alone. If that is true, then Maya Angelou is right...

The sun has come.
The mist has gone.
We see in the distance...
our long way home.
I was always yours to have.
You were always mine.

We have loved each other in and out of time.
When the first stone looked up at the blazing sun
and the first tree struggled up from the forest floor
I had always loved you more.
You freed your braids...
gave your hair to the breeze.
It hummed like a hive of honeybees.
I reached in the mass for the sweet honeycomb there....
Mmmm...God how I love your hair.

You saw me bludgeoned by circumstance.
Lost, injured, hurt by chance.
I screamed to the heavens...loudly screamed....
Trying to change our nightmares into dreams...

The sun has come.
The mist has gone.
We see in the distance our long way home.
I was always yours to have.
You were always mine.
We have loved each other in and out
in and out
in and out
of time.

Take heart beloved. God's heart is laid bare tonight. Merry Christmas!

AMEN.