

Christmas Eve Sermon 2020
The Rt. Rev. Dr. Bonnie A. Perry
December 24, 2020
Cathedral Church of St. Paul

May the God who creates....
Good Evening!

“Get up, we have to go to the barn.” Milking starts at 7:00 am. Tali, our Australian Shepherd, and Owen, our miniature dachshund, are both anxious to go. They’ve learned very quickly that on the farm, in the barn, when the goats are milked, the first squirts always go in bowls for each of the dogs, even the not particularly helpful dogs from the city.

Get up, we have to go to the barn on Spruce Hill Farm in Maple City, MI where Chief the horse, is waiting not so patiently in his stall, and Hollywood, Joanne, Trixie, Dosey Doe, Stella and Bea the French Alpine goats, all stand stomping their hooves in anticipation of jumping up on their milking stands, having a bite to eat and being relieved of their lactic burden.

We have to go to the barn where Screech and her chicks now almost fully grown, wander in just up from their brood where Screech, the mother hen, every night still settles down on top of them, her wings outstretched protecting them all through the dark hours of the night from any prowling predator that may somehow get in.

The barn, the barn, get up we have to go to the barn. Now my friends more than ever today, this night, this eve, we have to go to the barn.

It’s been a year, whether you think of it as a dumpster fire or an out of control roller coaster ride where the car just keeps going down, headlong, and it seems, some days, all we can do is hang on and pray the car doesn’t come completely off the track. Like the shepherds, overlooked, underpaid essential workers of their day, like the shepherds, we too have to go to the barn.

“The people walked in darkness,” do you feel it all around: creeping, crawling prowling? The People who walked in darkness—But Isaiah says, “The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined.”

Tonight— more than any other Christmas Eve I can ever recall, I am so aware of the night, and I am so looking for that light.

And so I remember, and I recall a story in our sinews, of a night—of o so long ago—

a night that was so cold you could see the wind and hear the stars, on that night, this night, they were working, watching, and some sleeping, taking turns tending to the lambs, rams and ewes, the lost and little ones having all been found. They were in the fields, overlooked, keeping watch over their flocks.

When Holiness found them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

Then it became an either/or kind of night, O so long ago. Imperial decrees or heavenly songs. Counting emperors, or singing angels. Overcrowded inns or empty stables. Darkness or light.

It was a night, O so long ago, when the shepherds got to decide which way to go: deep darkness or the great light? When they got to decide how to act: paralysis or adventure. When they were able to choose: despair or hope.

To be sure, it was an either/or kind of night O so long ago.

It's that night again my friends—an either/or kind of time. Is it darkness or the light? Treading water or moving forward. Polarities or compromise. Cynicism or optimism. Status quo or new endeavor. Suspicion or gratitude. Despair or hope,

Let's think for a moment about hope.

The Rev. Peter Gomes the late Dean of the Harvard Memorial Chapel says this about hope--“Hope's greatest power is that it enables the present by embracing the future. Hope doesn't deny the circumstances of the present, and hope doesn't help us get out of our difficulties. Hope doesn't get us out, but it does get us through...”

Hope is not stoical endurance, [although it does help to endure, but whereas endurance has a certain almost fatalistic quality to it,] hope itself goes beyond that which must be endured.

Hope allows us to transcend.

“Unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a savior who is Christ the Lord.” said the choirs of heavenly hosts to the shepherds.

Hope, must have been the fuel inspiring the shepherds to go and find the barn with the baby in the manger. For after the Angels left and returned to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go to Bethlehem and see this thing which has been made known to us. So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.’

And it is in the barn that it all becomes very real. For there was a child, a little one, an infant, wrapped in rags, surrounded by an exhausted couple and animals that remind me

a great deal of Chief and Dosey Doe, and Hollywood and Screech, the horse, goats and chickens in Dick and Mary's barn in Maple City Michigan. Real animals, real people, a little baby, an infant child, helpless, vulnerable. A baby announced by heaven and labored onto earth, a newborn from God trusting us, trusting all of humanity to care for him, hold him, love him, raise him, follow him.

The shepherds went to the barn in hope, with hope, for hope, and found God. They found holiness, wrapped in rags surrounded by love.

It's an either/or kind of night friends.

Do we choose fatalistic despair and give in to COVID and allow it to continue to surge out of control. Do we say, 'it's now, I'm tired of all these limitations.' Do we give up protecting one another, staying away for now away from each other? Do we just give up and give in and accept that thousands more will die? Or do we live in hope and thanksgiving that a vaccine is now here and will within 6 or 8 months change the calculus of our world? Hope invites us to continue masking and sacrificing, knowing then that so many more of us will live.

Do we accept that political polarities and racist vitriol are enshrined in our American culture or will we move toward people who have different views, different beliefs with arms open, mouths closed ready to listen, hear and learn. Do we have enough hope in what has been foretold to go and see?

For I bring you good news of great joy and peace and goodwill. Might we dare to believe?

Will we be content to stay in our fields, longing for the past and oblivious to what could be? Will we risk trying, experimenting, sometimes failing with new ways of being church and faith-filled communities?

Or will we say that the angels sang for someone else for another time?

Friends, let's go the barn and see this thing which the angels have made known to us. Let's go to the barn and see, for it is that journey in sure and certain hope that we will find our Lord once more.

Those who have lived in deep darkness, on us, this night, a light has shined.

Amen.