
*"Be Born in Us Today"**

*[1] Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," verse 5.

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Thee Smith The First Sunday after Christmas

In the name of the One who shared our humanity so that we may share in His divinity, Amen.
(Paraphrase: Collect for the Second Sunday of Christmas, Book of Common Prayer - BCP)

To all who received him . . . he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God (John 1:12-13).

So you are no longer a slave but a child (Galatians 4:7a).

I

I wonder if you're like me this time of year—haunted by certain songs and prayers. If you're like me, then we're both haunted like Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens' Christmas Carol: haunted by the ghosts of Christmas past, and of Christmas present, and of Christmas future. Today's scripture readings, for example, the ones from John and Galatians that I quoted just now, take me all the way back to our Collect from the last Sunday of Pentecost (BCP). That was when we prayed: Almighty God—

Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule . . .

That phrase rings out to me: "the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin." It rings out especially when I hear today's reading from Galatians declare that we are "no longer a slave but a child" (4:7). If you're like me, any number of things come to mind about no longer being enslaved. Wow! What a long list that could be: no longer being slaves to some habit; no longer being slaves to some prejudice; and so on.

Instead we're given that image of being a child. With that image we link to today's gospel from John. There, those who receive Jesus are promised 'power to become children of God.' And we're told that we are 'born not of human power but of God' (John 1:12-13). Wow again: a divine power to be Godlike. That's what's promised to us!

Here's another haunting I want to mention: the last verse of our communion hymn; the hymn that we will sing together in a few minutes: "O Little Town of Bethlehem." In the last verse of that hymn we sing:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem . . . cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today."

Be born in us today, we pray. Now notice how that last verse condenses our Christian faith into a few short phrases: first the incarnation—"O holy child of Bethlehem," then the Cross and atonement—"cast out our sin and enter in," and finally our daily life as practitioners of beloved community living life in the Spirit—"be born in us today."

As we continue to sing that hymn throughout the twelve days of Christmas, you may be haunted like me by other prayers and scriptures. Recall this one, for another example, from our Collect for the 4th Sunday of Advent. That was when we prayed that Christ be born in us as in a mansion, and not in a manger the way he

was born in Bethlehem.

So we prayed:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ . . . may find in us a mansion prepared for himself (Advent 4).

II

Here for a few minutes let's be haunted a bit more by the hymn, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." Here's the story about how it became so popular around the world.

The words were first written in 1868, just a few years after the end of our Civil War here in the U.S. It was written by Phillips Brooks (1835-1893) while he was rector of Holy Trinity Episcopal church in Philadelphia.

The carol is popular on both sides of the Atlantic, but to different tunes: in the United States and Canada, to "St. Louis" by Brooks' collaborator, Lewis Redner; and in the United Kingdom and Ireland to "Forest Green", a tune collected by Ralph Vaughan Williams . . .

[Brooks] was inspired by visiting the village of Bethlehem . . . in 1865. Three years later [in 1868], he wrote the poem for his church, and his organist Lewis Redner (1831–1908) added the music.

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[Listen to how Redner told] the story of his composition.

As Christmas of 1868 approached, Mr. Brooks told me that he had written a simple little carol for the Christmas Sunday-school service, and he asked me to write the tune to it. The simple music was written in great haste and under great pressure. We were to practice it on the following Sunday. Mr. Brooks came to me on Friday, and said, "Redner, have you ground out that music yet to 'O Little Town of Bethlehem'?" I replied, "No", but that he should have it by Sunday. On the Saturday night previous my brain was all confused about the tune . . . But I was roused from sleep late in the night hearing an angel-strain whispering in my ear, and seizing a piece of music paper I jotted down the treble of the tune as we now have it, and on Sunday morning before going to church I filled in the harmony. Neither Mr. Brooks nor I ever thought the carol or the music to it would live beyond that Christmas of 1868.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/O_Little_Town_of_Bethlehem

[That's how the composer described the divine inspiration behind his tune.] It was an immediate hit with children and adults. Other churches began using it . . . Over the following six years, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" was the most popular Christmas carol in Philadelphia . . . Lewis Redner always insisted the song came to him as a gift from God.

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Though Phillips Brooks wrote several other Christmas and Easter hymns . . . O Little Town of Bethlehem survived the test of time and continues to be sung in churches all over the world.

<https://leben.us/o-little-town-bethlehem-story-behind-song/>

III

Now here's the back story to how Phillips Brooks himself wrote the words to the hymn.

In 1862, [Phillips Brooks] was invited to be the minister of . . . Trinity Church in his hometown of Boston . . . Brooks was also a staunch defender of the Union during the civil war. When President Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, it was Brooks who was invited to deliver a eulogy at Lincoln's Philadelphia funeral service.

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While at Holy Trinity . . . as his fame [as a preacher] was spreading, Brooks was being depleted physically, emotionally and spiritually. By 1863 the nation was in the midst of the Civil War. Citizen morale was low and everyone knew someone who had been killed in battle. On Sundays, scores of women – dressed in mourning black – could be seen scattered throughout the sanctuary because they grieved the death of a husband or son. Week after week, Brooks climbed into the pulpit trying to offer words of comfort, hope, and inspiration. When the war finally ended, Brooks' energies were completely diminished.

In December 1865, exhausted physically, spiritually and emotionally, Brooks made a pilgrimage to Palestine where he hoped to renew his spirit. On Christmas Eve, he distanced himself from the thousands of other pilgrims who had arrived in the Holy Land for Christmas. Unaccompanied, Brooks borrowed a horse and set out across the desolate desert exploring the land of Jesus' birth on his own and with his own eyes. As the sun faded and the stars began to emerge, he rode into the small village of Bethlehem. There he recalled the Gospel stories of Christ's birth and powerfully [experienced] the true meaning of Christmas. Returning home, he would tell family and friends that his experience that evening was so overpowering it would permanently be "singing in my soul."

<https://leben.us/o-little-town-bethlehem-story-behind-song/>

So that's the story of Phillips Brooks' inspiration. For three years he was haunted by that experience until he wrote the words we still sing today.

IV

One final reflection comes to us from the 17th Century German poet, Franciscan priest, physician and mystic Angelus Selesius. Selesius wrote provocatively that, "Christ could be born a thousand times in Bethlehem—but all in vain until He is born in me." (Cf. my source for this quotation: Ben Sternke, "Mansion Prepared: A reflection on the Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent," December 22, 2024; <https://bensternke.substack.com/p/a-mansion-prepared>)

So maybe, as we continue to sing hymns and carols throughout the twelve days of Christmas, maybe we will also be haunted by the other prayers and scriptures that culminate in this first Sunday of Christmas. Prayers like asking God to—

Mercifully grant that the peoples of the earth, divided and enslaved by sin, may be freed and brought together under his most gracious rule (Last Pentecost, BCP).

And the prayer to—

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself (Advent 4 Collect, BCP).

Amen.