



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, *Rector*

## The Bounce-back of Hope

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock p.m. service, December 24, 2014  
The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord—Based on Luke 2:1-20*

The marvelous thing about Christmas Eve is that it always arrives just in the nick of time. Just when the tolerance level for bad news gets stretched to and almost beyond the limit, Christmas Eve shows up. But even on a night as auspicious and glorious as this, that bad news doesn't go away. From the hacking of a huge movie studio and a really silly movie about which I would care nothing under normal circumstances but now, of course, think I must see it, to the shocking murder of two police officers in Brooklyn and the grief of their families, to the continuing and far from resolved issues of justice and fairness that divide our city and our country, to more military conflicts around the globe than I can enumerate, the news is still the news. Christmas doesn't change that.

And, yet, just as surely as that is true, Christmas does in fact change everything. For you see, Christmas is more process than event, more journey than one enchanted evening. As adults inevitably do in one way or another, I, too, a very long time ago reordered this night, accommodating all sorts of conflicting understandings and information; and, yet, the sparkle of it, of this *particular* night—dare I say it, the magic of it—remains critically important to me. It is not that I suspend disbelief, not that I at 60+ years old somehow reconstitute as a little child for this one night, not that at all. In fact, it is much more than that; it is that this night enlarges me, allowing me to *know* deep in my soul, which is quite a different process from and deeply more important than simply believing. Believing can be altered by the arrival of new information; knowing is eternal in a way that has little to do with the latest data.

On this night, this is what I know: the essence of Christmas, the kernel of eternal truth that manages to survive forever, is that God desires to be in relationship with us. More through divine insistence than simple desire, God and humankind move in a complicated—though inevitable, I believe—series of stops and starts toward union. In the Christian world *this* night is the story of how that dance was and continues to be deepened. Ours is not the only story but the one which, for us, teaches the steps of how God and we have come to kiss, how we exist and know our being in the world as part of a larger story than one simply of ourselves.

It is more nearly correct to say that I am charmed by the details of the narrative than that I believe them; and, yet, I know them to be true. I know them in a way that is unbothered by belief. Living my life without knowing the truth of Christmas is unthinkable for me—and fundamentally non-survivable. In a way that is best explained by the story of Christmas, God exists for me—exists by coming near, by coming in the flesh and blood of a person, once and for all showing me that we shall not be alone, which is not the absence of loneliness, a reality each of us from time to time will experience, but the assurance that we shall never be deeply, existentially isolated because Emmanuel, God with us, has come.

Like our lives, the coming of this grand connection was and is much messier than our lovely crèches and beautifully wrapped gifts seem to suggest. It shouldn't be lost on us that the birth of Jesus was messy and in much more significant ways than the obvious ones, having to do with bodies and animals crowded into a most non-hygienic setting. It was messy, *and* the world around it was messy, and it was not suddenly transformed. The Romans continued to occupy; Herod remained vicious; poverty sucked life at the same rate

it had for years; the necessary toil to sustain a meager life was as hard as ever; the sun was hot; and the nights were cold. And, yet, into all that mess came a new light, and the ongoing miracle is that the light continues to come and to shine.

*But* it is still messy. Christmas shines light into darkness; it does not erase it. By definition, Incarnation is quite different from perfection. The principal players in the nativity drama were human beings; and as the story of God's continuing to be born again and again into the world unfolds, the principal players still are—quite thoroughly human. Christmas does not gloss over the realities of our lives; it simply provides a connection with God that allows us to live those realities with hope, which is far from nothing.

One of the most influential theologians of the last hundred years is the German theologian Jurgen Moltmann, who has written extensively about hope—having known hopelessness in his own story. At the age of 18 he was drafted into the German army. Serving barely one year, he was captured in 1945 and spent the next three years in various war prisons. Though he had had little personal involvement in the war, his guilt was deep and despondent, so deep that he once wrote that he would rather have died than live to face what had occurred at the hands of his nation. Having been reared in a secular home, it was during this time of imprisonment after the war that he began to find hope in God. For him, it came through the experience of, as he put it, “having been found by Christ.” Returning home to Germany at only 22, he felt a compulsion to devote the rest of his life to understanding and articulating a theology that would speak to the survivors of his generation, survivors on both sides of the war. And he did so powerfully.

Over the years he came to speak of the “life-power of hope,” likening it to the inflated bounce-back toy that once was so popular. Some of you may remember. No matter the direction or force with which we punched the inflated figure, because of the way it was balanced, it would bounce back up. Somehow that wonderfully resonant image captures for me the essence of the Christmas message. No honest and sane person argues that hope stays up every second. We are punched and knocked about and sometimes we—as individuals and as a society—not only stagger but fall flat on our faces. But what Moltmann bears witness to is that hope does not stay down. It bounces back not as a weak-kneed act of desperation but as a valiant response, an active response that bends and molds with all the circumstances of life. This bounce-back action is the context in which we as faithful people choose to live our lives. Hope is not rendered powerless in the face of the pain of defeat. The life-power of hope makes standing—standing up again after we have fallen perhaps many times—even in the face of defeat or disappointment or sadness or death not only possible but an act of such power and resilience that even death cannot take away the life-power of hope. Hope means that we never stop coming back for another try, that we bounce back just like the indomitable inflated figure, perhaps a bit worn and tattered but not down for the count.

The anarchists and nihilists among us argue that we have devolved beyond the power of hope, that meaninglessness is the new normal. Unchecked materialism purports its own more insidious and therefore more dangerous version of that kind of thinking, claiming that all that matters is how much we can accumulate or consume. Christmas meets these dark misrepresentations about life and stops them in their tracks: such darkness will not overcome, for a great light has shown into the world and continues to shine.

It's Christmas Eve, my brothers and sisters, and even if we feel like a mess, even if our lives really are a mess at this particular moment in time, we can go home tonight with hope. Christmas is a process—just as we are; and the light of God and hope and goodness and love continues to shine brightly in this world. The story is not finished—not by a long shot. God help us never to forget it! Merry, merry Christmas.

In the name of God: *Amen.*