



Grand Commandery of Knights Templar of the State of West Virginia

January 2024

I hope all Sir Knights and their families had a wonderful Christmas and will enjoy a happy and prosperous New Year. While Christmas Day is past, we still celebrate the birth of Christ the King. With that in mind, I hope you will read the following Christmas message from Reverend Benny E. Gurley, PC #15 Grand Prelate, Grand Commandery of the State of West Virginia. It not only remembers the birth of Christ but calls us to action in the new year.

Sincerely,

Charles R. (Sam) Krafft

Right Eminent Grand Commander

From the Apartment of the Grand Prelate

2023 Christmas Message

Mary's time had come. After the long journey, the road to Bethlehem, and the days of worry before that, what would Joseph say when he found out she was pregnant? How did this happen anyway? But Joseph had stood by her and now the time had finally come, in a strange city with no family there to help, and the barn would have to do. There was no room in the inn, but how could they have afforded that anyway? Money was hard to come by. The baby at last was coming and Mary was terrified.

And the shepherds, too, were terrified. Like Mary and Joseph, they weren't sleeping inside that night: They were out in the fields and it was cold. And suddenly this Angel of the Lord was confronting them, this glory of the Lord was nearly blinding them, and this multitude from heaven was declaring peace on earth. There hadn't been peace for a long time; how was this baby lying in a manger going to bring peace now? It didn't make sense.

We have heard this story before and we are probably not terrified tonight, as Mary and the shepherds were. But maybe we should be. Because if Christmas really comes, the way we say we want it to, things will have to change. The world will be reborn. The Kingdom of God will come on earth, as in heaven.

Still, like Mary, we have been waiting, and praying, and hoping for this night. When the Angel Gabriel told her she would bear God's Son into the world, Mary's response was, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Mary agreed to do this, despite the strange and unusual circumstances. She knew people would think the wrong thing and look down on her. She knew that Joseph might not understand. Even knowing how hard this would be, she said yes.

We also have a choice. We are not here merely to remember what happened so long ago on a cold night in Bethlehem. Like Mary, God is asking us: Will you bear Christ into the world? Will you carry Jesus in your heart?

Our road is different from Mary's, but it is challenging in its own way. A new baby always changes things. Your life is no longer your own. If you agree to let Jesus be born again tonight, your life will change, maybe in ways you don't expect. So be careful how you answer.

The Christmas story can so easily be lost under a sentimental blanket of snow, with cows gently lowing and stars brightly shining. This is true with the carols we sing, too. They are so familiar that we sometimes miss the real meaning.

For example: "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear." The really interesting stuff in this carol happens in verse three. This is true of most Christmas carols, actually: The real theology happens two or three verses in. Here's the third verse of "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear":

"Yet, with the woes of sin and strife the world has suffered long;
beneath the heavenly hymn have rolled two thousand years of wrong;
and warring humankind hears not the tidings which they bring;
O hush the noise and cease your strife and hear the angels sing.

And here's the second verse of "In the Bleak Mid-Winter":

"Our God – heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain;
heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign."

Christina Rossetti, who wrote this carol, is making a bold theological claim in this verse. When God comes – if God comes – heaven and earth will "flee away." Heaven and earth as we know them now -- everything we know, everything we see – will simply stop. Vanish. And then what? What comes next? Well, what comes next – what happens when God comes – is what Rossetti wants us to think about. Perhaps the best example of Christmas carol theology is "O Little Town of Bethlehem." The first couple of verses are sweet, almost cloying – all those "Christmas angels" and "silent stars." But Phillips Brooks, the famous 19th-century preacher who wrote this carol, knew what he was doing. He has given us a perfect sermon in miniature. Here is the last line:

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.

We hear the Christmas angels, the great glad tidings tell;

O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel."

The carol has gotten rather serious by this fifth verse. "Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today" – not so sweet, is it? It may be what we need – it may even be what we want, what we are praying for – but it doesn't sound easy.

"Cast out our sin" brings to mind some lines from the Magnificat, the Song that Mary sings after she hears from Gabriel that she is pregnant:

"[God] has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly.

He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.”

There's some resonance between God's tearing our sin from us and casting it out, as in the carol, and God casting down the mighty from their thrones, sending the rich away, empty. Being sent away empty isn't a punishment, you see – its a blessing. If we allow God to cast out our sin – if we allow God to empty us out – then we will be blessed indeed, just as Mary was.

And what is it, exactly, that we need to be rid of this year? What is the sin that needs casting out, the thing that's getting in the way of God being born in us? Our desire to be important? To have all the right things? To have more than we need?

What is it that occupies your heart this Christmas? Maybe it's sadness, frustration, anger? The feeling that you're not good enough or smart enough or kind enough? Or maybe you're lonely or afraid?

Whatever is in there, God wants to be in your heart, too. And if you let God in, even just a little bit: Watch out! Cast out our sin and enter in. He has sent the rich away, empty.

It is only after we have been emptied – of all the ridiculous things, all the needless stuff that gets in the way of God's love – only when we are emptied of these worries, these desires, are we ready to be filled with the love of God.

Only when we are empty can Christ be born in us. Only when we are empty will Christmas come. We can sing the carols and put out the manger, but unless we are willing to be emptied out, there won't be any place for God to live.

This is the inside work, the thing that must happen inside our hearts, in order for the outside work to move forward. And the outside work is the coming of the Kingdom of God.

Heaven and earth shall flee away, you see, when he comes to reign. We are being asked to bear God into the world, just as Mary did. And just like Mary, we know that this is not going to be easy, and it's going to change everything. Are we brave enough to do this, knowing that if God's kingdom really comes, our lives change forever? Are we willing to be cast down, emptied out, so that God may be raised up?

This labor, this bringing about the Kingdom of God, will not be easy. But this is Christmas; the time has come, and our call is to bear Jesus into the world, just as Mary bore him so long ago.

We are called to put flesh on the values of God's kingdom, to put hands and feet and brains and shoulders to work for peace and justice and love.

Come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel. Be born in us today.

Amen and Amen.

Respectfully submitted:

Reverend Benny E. Gurley, PC #15 Grand Prelate
Grand Commandery of the State of West Virginia