

A sermon for the Parish of the Epiphany in Winchester, Massachusetts, preached by the rector, the Reverend Thomas James Brown, on the Eve of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ, 2009. To God be the glory.

A Sermon for the Eve of the Nativity

Some of you will remember my predecessor three times removed. If you haven't met him, but have heard about him, doubtless like it does for me, the echo of the very name *Jack Bishop* might ring in your ears. If you're visiting us tonight, and have indeed never heard of Jack Bishop, let me catch you up. He was the rector here from 1966 until 1989; he's now retired on the south shore, and besides being a great pastor and friend to this community, he and his wife, Betsy, have become in these first few months a cherished part of my immersion here at the Epiphany.

Last week Betsy & Jack and Tom and I had a four hour lunch. We caught up on many of you, on each other, and thoroughly basked in the goodness of new friendship. Some of you will remember that Jack came of age at a time, and was trained for ministry in places, where civil rights, and women's equality, and how to make sense of the church in the 60s and 70s were crucial subjects for leadership and for mission. Jack is proud, rightfully, for his liberal credentials, and for a theological foundation which helped the Episcopal Church respond persuasively with news of the gospel, rather than news about the latest addition to the social register.

"Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology, that was our bread and butter" said Jack. And then came the test. It was bound to happen. The senior priest coaching the young acolyte, going in gentle for the first part of lunch, but then cutting to the quick. "Did you see the window of him? At the Epiphany, Thomas? Of Dietrich Bonhoeffer?" I looked blankly toward Mr. Bishop. He waited for me to say "yes, yes, I love it!" No point in pretending otherwise, so I answered honestly. "Ah...actually, no, Jack. What window?"

"What window?" It's in the narthex. May I suggest that you find that window?"

I have done so. If *you* haven't seen the window take a look for yourself as you leave this evening. Thanks to our sexton, it's illuminated from the outside.

In the 1930s, in Germany, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, was a young pastor who founded a small school, a community really, to teach theology to a generation of would-be pastors. He founded the school for those who, like him, wanted nothing to do with the Caesar of the moment--Adolf Hitler. He brought uncommon wisdom and compassion to forming a generation of witnesses for the Prince of Peace. But the Nazi regime caught him, in the fall of 1943, and Pastor Bonhoeffer was imprisoned for plotting to overthrow Hitler. Here's what he wrote to his parents:

Of course you can't help thinking of my being in prison over Christmas. All I can do to help is to assure you that I know you will keep it in the same spirit as I do, for it is from you that I learned the story. On Christmas Eve I shall be thinking of you all very much, and I want you to believe that I too shall have a few hours of real joy, and that I am not allowing my troubles to get the better of me. (Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Letter to his parents, December 17, 1943, reprinted in *Christmas* by GIA).

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Can we do likewise, not allow our troubles to get the better of us? And can we look not so much for the stained glass window of Bonhoeffer, but rather for a way of life in which we shine the light into the world beyond this church? Oh, how I know we can, because you have!

We're here tonight to celebrate the truth of Christ, and yes, to sing and to be with family and friends. And in my case, to be with you for the first time, a sacred privilege which makes my cup run over. But if this truth of Jesus eludes you, tonight, or regularly, if faith in Christ's birth is not something you share, we invite you to join us at this place, and at this Altar. Your Christmas gift might well be the joy of believing. Or, if you come tonight weighed down with anxiety, or a sense of obligation, or with deep questions about the future, or an old-fashioned case of the blues, you too are invited to receive comfort at this Altar. All of us must remember that the religion in which we dwell here is unembarrassed to make the claim that God--spiritually, theologically, philosophically, and even scientifically, that God entered into human life. Everybody's.

See and feel the ancient power of tonight's story, the powerfully familiar story of the birth of Jesus, told with careful art and poetry, telling a truth.

The story says they traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, about 110 kilometers. A long walk. Did they know what they were in for? We don't know. Reasonably we doubt it. Do you suppose they knew they were birthing a child whose life, and whose death, and whose rising again would change the world? The power of this truth creates within every single one of us a power that says in spite of all the bad we can do, and all the bad that can happen, we are free to practice care and kindness for others. Not to receive it, but to give it.

How far have you traveled tonight? How far would you be willing to travel, spiritually, emotionally, in every term you can think of, how far would you travel, that is to change, to take this ancient, beautiful story, which is also so much more than story, and to give without counting the cost? Tonight we are fully human, the Word is in our flesh. When we practice kindness, when we give love, when we work for real care, something like authentic justice, something like peace on earth, that's the incarnation, that's the birth of Jesus the Christ. That's truth. It's a truth about which Dietrich Bonhoeffer cared passionately, even unto death; it's a truth which shaped Jack Bishop, your 7th rector, and it's a truth which #10 endeavors to practice as well. With your grace and patience, we might discover truth together, anew.

So let it shine through every window. The one in the narthex, and the one in each of our hearts; love streaming from the radiance of our Creating God, and then made perfect in this precious baby.

A happy and holy Nativity to you all, my friends. Amen.