

It is no secret that our country is experiencing significant divisions. It seems that every year we are becoming more and more divided, that the fault lines are deepening. It sometimes seems that both sides are just talking past each other with no real dialogue. It seems we no longer have common assumptions, common ground to stand upon.

It has been observed that our divisions in America haven't been this bad since the late 1960's, and before that since the Civil War and its aftermath in the 1860's.

So tonight, I want to look at events from past Christmas Eves, events from those past eras of division. Because I believe there are lessons for us, spiritual wisdom to help guide us. I believe these lessons from the past can help us as we celebrate the birth of our Savior tonight. But I believe these examples from Christmases past can also help us in living as the people of Jesus Christ in the months and years to come.

So tonight, as we celebrate Christmas Eve 2018, I want to look back on a events that happened 50 years ago tonight in 1968, and 150 years ago tonight in 1868.

First 1968. I was a young child during 1968, one of the toughest years in American history. 1968 was marked by a slew of difficult events: the assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Tet Offensive, the My Lai massacre, the capture of the USS Pueblo, the chaos in Chicago during the Democratic convention, along with other assorted riots and protests in numerous cities, and an election process that reflected deep divisions amongst the people of this country.

And yet, towards the end of 1968, there was a different kind of moment. On December 21, the crew members of Apollo 8 lifted off. They would become not only the first humans to leave Earth orbit, but they were also the first to travel 66 hours and 234,000 miles in order to circle the Moon.

On Christmas Eve they entered lunar orbit. They took the one of the most famous photos of the 20th Century. "Earthrise from the Moon" showed a grayish lunar horizon, with a blue and white Earth rising above it. They were the first humans to experience Earth from this perspective.

One of the astronauts, Jim Lovell, would later report that the Earth was so distant that he could cover it completely with his thumb held at arm's length.

And then, later on that Christmas Eve, the three astronauts sent a message to the Earth from lunar orbit. At that time, it was the most watched television broadcast in history.

The three astronauts took turns reading from the first 10 verses of the Bible, from the first creation story in the book of Genesis:

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth..."

They continued on through all 10 verses concluding the reading with the words, "And God called the dry land Earth... And God saw that it was good."

And then the commander added these final words:

"And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas and God bless all of you—all of you on the good Earth."¹

Upon returning to Earth, the crew was inundated with messages that said basically the same thing: "Thank you for saving 1968."

50 years ago tonight, the Apollo 8 astronauts reminded the world of a vital reality. This Earth is God's creation. The people we share this Earth with are God's children. We're all here because God has put us here. And we're all in this together.

Many years later Jim Lovell would say about that Christmas Eve 1968:

"When you see Earth from the Moon, you realize how fragile it is and just how limited the resources are. We're all astronauts on this spaceship Earth—about six or seven billion of us—and we have to work and live together."²

A half-century later, the theological lessons of Apollo 8 are still important. The Heavens and the Earth belong to God. God calls us to share this Earth and live in harmony with his billions of other children. This Earth is a rare and precious oasis of life in a largely cold and empty universe.

And if we think we have no common ground upon which to stand, we simply need to look at the ground beneath us. This is God's Earth, and we are all God's creatures, together. We might have many differences. But what unites us is far more important than what divides us. That was Good News 50 years ago tonight on Christmas Eve 1968. And it is still Good News, and important news, on Christmas Eve 2018.

But I also want to look at another Christmas Eve, a century before Apollo 8. I want to look at Christmas Eve 1868, as well as its relationship to Christmas Eve, 1865. And to do so, I want to talk briefly about one of the greatest Episcopal Priests of the 1800s, the Rev. Phillips Brooks.

Phillips Brooks is no longer a household name. But in his time, he was the most famous Episcopal Priest in the world. He was widely regarded in his time as America's greatest preacher.

When Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, it was Phillips Brooks who was asked to preach the sermon at his funeral.³

¹ Charles D. Benson, "Apollo 8—A Christmas Gift"

² "The Earth Behind a Man's Thumb," *Newsweek*, 11/10/07

³ The Philadelphia version that is. As Lincoln's body was taken on a circuitous route from Washington, DC to be buried in Springfield, IL, there were several large funeral services in several cities.

But the Civil War took a heavy toll on Brooks's heart. Not only was he grieving the loss of Abraham Lincoln. Brooks was also devastated by the loss of his brother who died during the war while fighting in the Union Army.

And so, in the middle of 1865, Brooks's congregation gave him a paid sabbatical, and Brooks traveled Europe and then on to the Holy Land. He was in Jerusalem that December. And on Christmas Eve, 1865, Brooks decided to ride horseback the 6 miles from Jerusalem down to the village of Bethlehem.

As he was riding into town, he passed shepherds in hills outside of Bethlehem. He reflected upon the angels appearing to the shepherds that first Christmas. He reflected on the angels' message: "Unto you is born this day... a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord." And Brooks reflected upon those words, how personal they were. 'Unto you... is born a savior.'

And he reflected on Isaiah's words: "A child has been born for us, a son given to us." As Isaiah also said, "His name shall be Immanuel (God with us)." In the fields outside Bethlehem, Brooks had a renewed sense of how wonderfully intimate and personal it was. Jesus was born for all of us.

And then Brooks went to the ancient Basilica of the Nativity, the church built over the cave that was regarded as the place where Jesus was born. And there, in that church, that night, Brooks participated in the elaborate Orthodox Christmas Eve service that stretched six hours, with songs and prayers and praise filling that church built over the spot of Jesus' birth. "He would later write of how moved he was to hear choirs singing hymns of praise to God for hours on end as he stood close to the spot where Jesus was said to have been born."⁴ The beauty, the joy, and the peacefulness of that worship in Bethlehem were wonderfully healing for Brooks.

Brooks later returned to America and to parish ministry. Which brings us to 1868. 1868 was a time of great difficulty in our country. The Civil War was over, but there were still deep wounds and deep political divisions. There was extreme distrust of politicians. The economy was a mess, and the stock market was highly volatile. Slavery was over, but there were still great conflicts over racial issues.

And as Christmas 1868 was approaching, Brooks was putting together the children's Christmas pageant. But he had a hard time picking a hymn for the children to sing that summed up his understandings of Christmas. In the midst of the difficulties of 1868, Brooks wanted a song that would convey the message of hope that he experienced in Bethlehem three years earlier on Christmas Eve 1865.

Brooks thought about his experiences three years earlier and decided to write a song himself. It came together quickly. And he was so excited, he took the text to his organist, Lewis Redner.

⁴ Ann Rodgers, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, "Bethlehem carol composer was pillar of Episcopal church" Thursday, December 25, 2003

Redner tried to come up with a tune, but nothing came. And then, in the middle of the night, it hit him— he got up and wrote it down. Redner regarded the tune as a gift from heaven.

And that very next evening, the children sang this song publicly for the first time. A couple of decades later, it was a Christmas standard.

*O little town of Bethlehem,
how still we see thee lie!
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
the silent stars go by...*

Brooks experienced peace in Bethlehem in 1865. But he also knew that Bethlehem wasn't that quiet when Jesus was born. The town was filled with people coming for the census. There was plenty of hustle and bustle in that town. They too lived in a world of deep divisions. Yet, that night, as people were sleeping off the busy events of the day, something earth shattering happened.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth
the everlasting Light...*

The people may have been asleep after a busy or wearying day. Yet in their midst, God was born into the world.

And the wonderfully poetic words describe the impact of Jesus' birth:

*The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

In modern astrophysics there is a term, "singularity." A singularity is an enormously huge amount of matter crammed into an extremely tiny space. A singularity is infinitely small. And yet it's got so much stuff in it that it's infinitely dense.

The birth of Jesus is just such a singularity. It gathers together an enormous amount of stuff. Everything we long for. Everything we're afraid of. All of our hopes. All of our pain.

Earth meets heaven. Our fear of isolation meets God's desire to be reconciled with us. The glory and purity of God's throne meet the messiness of the manure of the stable and the hay of the manger. Hatred and violence meet the loving Prince of Peace. Our fear of death meets God's promise of eternal life. All this happens in the person of Jesus Christ.

*The hopes and fears of all the years
are met in thee tonight.*

Christmas Eve 1968 and the Apollo 8 astronauts remind us that this is God's world. The ground beneath us is the common ground we stand on.

But Christmas Eve 1865 and 1868 and Phillips Brooks remind us of something even greater. God didn't JUST create the world. He entered it in the person of Jesus Christ. In a world of division and faction and strife, Jesus comes into our midst and into our mess. Jesus offers us healing, and unity, and peace. True peace. Heavenly peace.

This is God's world. We may make a mess of it at times. But it is still God's world. And God has come among us in Jesus Christ to offer light in the midst of darkness, to offer hope in the face of our fears.

That's Good News on Christmas Eve 2018. That's Good News as we seek to be God's people in 2019 and beyond.

This Christmas may God take your fears and transform them into hope. As St. Paul says, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope."⁵

Or in Brooks's words,
*We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel.*

⁵ Rom 15:13