

Christmas Eve 2021 “O Come, All Ye Faithful.”

For as long as I have been a pastor of a community of faith, I have chosen “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” as the opening hymn on Christmas Eve. And, for as long as I have been a pastor, I have preached on Christmas Eve utilizing the story from Luke about Jesus’ birth. But as I have said often, this time of the year really belongs to the singers, to the musicians. So, this year I am going to allow “O Come all Ye Faithful,” one of the great carols of the season, to carry the weight of the message.

“O Come, all Ye Faithful!” Christmas is an invitation to come, to leave something behind and experience something fresh and transforming. Come! Get up off the couch! Come! This new and transforming thing is compelling: it won’t let us sit still. Luke tells us that angels were dispatched by heaven and the shepherds couldn’t stay in their fields. Matthew tells us that wise men had to travel. They all came. This Jesus story draws us in, evokes our attention, attracts our hearts. Joseph Sittler says that there is “a haunting allure” to Jesus. He draws us in, even when we sometimes don’t want him to.

Come! Come all ye *faithful*! The faithful aren’t necessarily the pious or the churchy. They are the fascinated, the folks who long for a new world, those whose lives cry out for mercy, grace, and forgiveness. The faithful are those who know they stand in need of something bigger than their own little stories, their own failures, their own accomplishments.

“O come, all ye faithful. Joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye, to Bethlehem.” The experience we are being invited to is an experience of joy. It is an antidote for despair. It is healing for the broken, hope for the hopeless, and as such it brings a sense of triumph, not as in a victory over a loser, but as in the courage that enables bold movement into the future.

“Come ye to Bethlehem.” Come not to Jerusalem. Come not to the centers of power. But come to Muskegon, Dalton, Holton, Roosevelt Park, Muskegon Heights. Come to the ordinary places of your lives. Come to the places that can be easily overlooked. Oh, it’s not that these places don’t have history or are insignificant. Bethlehem was David’s hometown. It represented big hopes for a yearning people. All places are associated with big hopes. *Your* ordinary places are associated with big hopes. Come to the ordinary places. Surprisingly enough, they may be the locus for the extraordinary, especially for hearts that are poised to be surprised. Joseph Sittler writes: “How blended in Christian faith are the simple and the sublime [the extraordinary]! How strangely is the profound transmitted by the ordinary! How quickly crumples the pompous pretense of our lives before the primal pure!”

“Come ye to Bethlehem. Come and behold him, born the king of angels.” “Behold him!” Wow! That’s language we don’t use anymore. We simply say, “see him.” But beholding is different than seeing. To behold is to see with a deeper vision, to see with the heart. You can look at something, but not necessarily behold it. You can look at food and see it as fuel for your gut, but not receive it as gift from the hands of farmers, pickers, producers, transporters, cooks, servers, and ultimately God. One of the reasons we pray before a meal is to *behold* the food, to see it not as our due, our right, but as our gift.

“Behold him, born the king of angels.” This baby discovered in the ordinary town of Bethlehem is worth more than a glance. Something big is happening here. Something big is discovered in the cattle stall. Something big is lying in the mangers of your lives. I know you’re busy. I know you have many stresses and strains on your lives. I know you find it hard to keep up with the demands of family, your job, the house, the crazy culture. But something’s calling your name. Someone is

calling your name. Something, Someone larger than you. Someone who knows you better than you know yourself. Someone who loves you more than you love yourself. Someone whose very energy and breath links you to everyone and everything.

Don't just glance at the manger. Behold it. Behold it until you see and experience what runs the universe, what is in charge, until you are grasped by "the king of angels," the Lord of love, the prince of peace, and until the manger gives way to a cross, until love experienced in a baby becomes suffering love, until strength is known in weakness, until real life for yourself is discovered in getting over yourself.

Now, all of that may be scary, contrary to what the culture teaches you. And sometimes you will just want to keep your distance from all of that. Who wants to be changed that much? Just give me a sweet baby I can hold in my arms and give back to the parents. But this baby won't let you go. This baby is worth beholding. True love is after you.

"O, come let us adore him. O, come let us adore him. O, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord." Adore him! *Adore* him! Life is much more than what your brain tells you. Life is much more than your opinions. Life is about what you adore. Life is about being adored. You are adored. The love that began it all, that was experienced in a big bang, the love that sustains it all, the love that endures the pain of it all in the cross, the love that brings life out of death—that love is yours, too. You are adored. So, adore what adores you.

"O come, let us adore him. O come, let us adore him. O, come let us adore him, Christ the Lord."