

Sermon for Christmas Eve, 2016
Cathedral Church of All Saints
The Rt. Rev. Steven A. Miller

Titus 2:11–14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Titus 3:4–7

When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit: Amen

It is fitting that Luke in his Gospel telling us the story of Jesus birth records the singing of the angelic chorus, because without the hymns and carols of Christmas our celebration would be so much poorer. I have come to believe that the mystery and gift of love we celebrate this night cannot be expressed in word or music alone. Like the joining of the divine and human nature in the baby Jesus we remember this night so only the joining of music and verse can fully express the joy and wonder in our hearts this night.

As I wrote to you and the rest of the Diocese in my Christmas letter, for me, as I imagine for many of you, it is the hymns of Christmas that speak deeply to my sacred memory. Each Christmas as I sing the hymns that I have known and sung since childhood, I reminded of the faithful who have accompanied me on the journey of faith. I cannot sing *Joy to the World* without a part of me being the 10-year-old boy singing between my father and grandfather in a little church in Rose City, Michigan.

Each time I sing “O come, all ye faithful,” I see the face of a former senior warden at the first church I served in Virginia, coming in with gusto on the bass line, “O come let us adore him.” It is a chorus I pray he continues to enjoy as a member of the heavenly chorus. Many of you, I am certain, have similar sacred memories.

Two hymns in particular have been brought to my mind this year. The first, *Hark the Herald Angels Sing*, which I reflected on in my letter to the Diocese. The other, *In Dulci Jubilo*, the hymn most of us know as *Good Christian Men* or *Good Christin Friends, Rejoice* depending on the edition of the Hymnal from which we are singing or whose translation of this classic text is being used.

Many of us are familiar with the translation of this hymn by Robert Pearsal, a staple of services of lessons and carols like the one at King’s College, Cambridge, broadcast each Christmas Eve. Even more are familiar with the translation by John Mason Neale, the great Anglican hymn translator and author

whose works fill the pages of our Hymnal. More than 40 of his texts have filled the last two hymnals of this Church.

The hymn is a translation of an ancient text, “a [macaronic](#) alternation of [Medieval German](#) and [Latin](#), thought to have been written by the German mystic [Heinrich Seuse](#),” who lived in the 14th century. “According to folklore, Seuse heard angels sing these words and joined them in a dance of worship.^[2] In his biography (or perhaps autobiography), it was written:

Now this same angel came up to the Servant (Suso) brightly, and said that God had sent him down to him, to bring him heavenly joys amid his sufferings; adding that he must cast off all his sorrows from his mind and bear them company, and that he must also dance with them in heavenly fashion. Then they drew the Servant by the hand into the dance, and the youth began a joyous song about the infant Jesus.”

I am certain I was drawn to this text because of the call to rejoice, a call that is for me and I suspect for many of you may be harder to hear and act on this year. We see and hear of barbarism and terror in the world at what seems an ever increasing frequency—bombing of innocents in Syria, terror attacks in Europe, and increased gun violence across our nation and in our city. Many with whom I am in conversation express disbelief and feeling befuddled and puzzled asking themselves, “What is this world coming to? How did it come to this?”

For some the call to rejoice is difficult to hear this year not for any of these reasons but for ones which are more personal: the first Christmas without a loved one. Learning one’s position is being eliminated and wondering how will I make ends meet. Perhaps it is the anxiety of an upcoming medical test or surgery.

And yet the call to us this night is clear.

*Good Christian friends, rejoice
with heart and soul and voice;
give ye heed to what we say:
Jesus Christ is born today;
ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.
Christ is born today!
Christ is born today!*

As the Apostle Paul reminds us in his letter to the Philippians, Christians are those who are called to rejoice in the Lord always. We can do so because we know how great the love of God is. We know that in a babe born in a manger God has entered the world and that in this tiny child the hopes and fears of all our years are answered and addressed.

Tonight we gather to hear the angelic message spoken to the shepherds, “To you is born this day in the City of David which is Christ the Lord.” We gather this Christmas to proclaim that the Word become flesh and dwelt among us. We gather to celebrate that in Jesus, the incarnate one, was light, that His light still shines and the darkness will not overcome it. I need to be remind of this truth because without it I would be in despair.

I know I am not the only one. Our world needs to hear this truth now more than ever. If our gathering tonight is only to remember history, we are of all people most to be pitied. If our Christmas celebration is only a liturgical observance, let's just end this service now. The Good News that Christ is born is an invitation to join in the heavenly dance of love by serving, caring, embracing and joining God in his work of turning swords into plowshares by being instruments and agents of his love. As Christians, we have been called for such a time as this to join the angelic chorus and proclaim with our lips and lives what was begun on this most holy night. And the God who humbled himself to share our human nature, will empower us by his Spirit to do this holy work. He sends us forth in joy to invite the world to know that joy that comes from seeking Christ and living lives that reflect citizenship in his kingdom.

How are we to do this? Allow me to close with these words from my meditation last year which have an ever greater urgency tonight,

*When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins.
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,
To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.*

May the heavenly music this night lead you in the divine dance of love and may the song in your heart be a song of love and joy in thanksgiving for God's love for you and all creation.