



ST. ANDREW'S IN THE PINES EPISCOPAL CHURCH

SERMON
Christmas Eve
2016

Here we are – gathered together – and that is good. It is good. But now – why are we here? Have you taken any time to ponder why you have come to worship here on this evening?

For some of us it's a fairly easy answer. We are faithful to this congregation, to this place, to being part of this family. We are here because to be here is like visiting a loving family, to visit with a loving God. And while you might agree with that sentiment, some of you honestly are here because your other loving family wanted you to be here – so you came along, cooperating, agreeing to share in this time with them. And that is good.

Or perhaps you are uncertain why you are here – but something has drawn you to be in this place at this time. For some your reason might be tradition, participating in an honored tradition in our culture – church on Christmas Eve.

However mixed and uncertain our motives might be for gathering here this evening – I hope, and I pray that at a very profound level you are here to gather strength for the journey. Strength for the journey.

Let me flesh out a bit what I mean by that statement – strength for the journey. Many of you are aware that John and I and our family lived in central Nebraska for 18 years before moving back into Wyoming. We had a good life in Nebraska, a busy life. But like most lives there were times when I felt overwhelmed, anxious, off-kilter, strung out with the demands of job and family. When I had gone on too long in that state of being – I wanted to escape, to have a reprieve from my life and I have a vivid, rich memory of one of those escapes.

My grandfather built a simple log cabin in the Snowy Range Mountains outside of Laramie. I have been visiting that cabin since before my birth and I love being there. So that one Fall in Nebraska, we were able to squeeze in a quick weekend visit to the cabin before it was snowed in for the winter. We got there on Saturday morning and after opening things up, I left John and the children for a solitary walk to what we call the “broken bridge”. It's about a ½ mile walk on an old forest service road to a place where an old bridge used to allow you to cross over the creek. The bridge has been gone for years and the closed road is overgrown now but still discernible. This walk is one of our standard habits of every visit.

As I began to walk I became intensely aware of the beauty of this late fall day. A few leaves still quaked on the Aspens, the grasses were dried and cured. Lacy ice lined the edge of the stream. There was a hush in the crisp air about me and suddenly I began to sing some lines from Handel's Messiah. I didn't – still don't really know the song but the lines kept running in my head – "I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand, he shall stand at the last day." I know that my Redeemer liveth. For a short span of time I was caught up in the conviction of an amazing, awesome creator God, who had brought into being the beauty all around me; who had brought into being my very self. And all of it was so good, so good. And all was right in the world, all was well in this life I lived, all would work together for good in this journey I was on. I remember crouching for a few minutes admiring the intricate and cold beauty of the ice along the creek, of realizing I was getting cold, and walking back blissfully and totally at peace with who I was and the life I lived. I was renewed, refreshed, and ready to remain involved in the myriad relationships woven into my life. I knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that God journeyed with me and that was everything – all I needed – all I would ever need.

I'm sure I'm not alone in that sort of experience. I bet you all have some similar memory of being drawn to places and moments that refresh and renew your spirit. I've met people in town here who once in awhile have to visit the ocean. Many of you have favorite camping or hiking or fishing places. Sometimes we talk about our roots and I know not everyone feels the importance or draw of having roots in a place – but for some, feeling rooted, having the deep knowledge of a place and culture grounds us and centers us. Being in a place where you feel you belong calms and focuses you.

But beyond recognizing our roots, there is another explanation for moments that truly renew us and that is the recognizing of "thin places". A thin place is where there is simply little or no division between the natural world and the spiritual world. It's a place or a moment when you know God is very near – when the powerful presence of God's creation reminds us that we are living in the midst of things both seen and unseen – where heaven and earth seem to meet and we sense that God present with us. For a moment or two there is no separation between the two realities. The veil is parted and the heavenly hosts surround us.

That is where, I believe, we gather "strength for our journey" – when we notice those thin places, when we feel our rootedness to the source of life, when we have a moment to notice - hope, joy, peace in our life. That is why, I hope and pray, that is why we gather here on Christmas Eve.

We gather to once again be in awe of a God who dares to be humble enough to join us in our journey, to join us as a newborn infant, to join us as a human, to join us and live with us and teach us and forgive us and love us. We gather because the hymns and prayers and communion and quiet moments connect us to our very deepest roots, to the truest foundation which gives us the best of life. To be in this holy moment is to reconnect with the source of all strength, all gentleness, all endurance – the possibility of all that is good and loving. Christmas Eve worship is a thin place. Christmas Eve worship connects us to our deepest roots.

When we come into God's presence as the Body of Christ – together we touch, notice, and draw from the source of life – the life that provides all we need for our journey – the truest, most enduring strength for our journey.

Once again let's start this journey with the baby Jesus and travel onward, through and into heaven, together.

Thanks be to God.