



# ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. F. M. "Buddy" Stallings, Priest-in-Charge

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## Forever Light

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock pm service, December 24, 2012*

*Christmas Eve*

*Based on Luke 2: 1-20*

A week ago Friday, just after the start of the school day, hope as both concept and reality received a direct assault. In a matter of what in fact were a very few minutes, a heavily armed twenty-year old, barely a man himself, killed twenty children and six teachers in their school, a place heretofore presumed to be a site of sanctuary and compassion, of learning and play. The impact around the country of this singular act has been extraordinary and continues and is worsened even today by the shooting of four firemen in Webster, NY. We are outraged and perplexed; we are determined to prevent these events' recurrence and, yet, overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness in doing so. Though instantly connected, our capacity to enact change is not so immediate; and as a result, politics notwithstanding, a pall of hopelessness has descended upon us as a culture.

Into that milieu of wounded hope comes Christmas Eve this year. And, yet, my friends, on this holiest of nights, my message to you is that hope is not lost; it is down but it is not out—far from it. In fact, hope lives with a force all its own, a force that the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann calls the "life-power of hope." Hope powers on even when evidence points to hopelessness; hope powers on even when darkness wins the round; hope powers on because God has wired it into our DNA. Nothing mortal can ever change that.

I can't think of a recent experience that has more directly fired a shot into the heart of hope than Sandy Hook, but neither can I think of an event that has more clearly demonstrated its necessity in our lives. We don't just hope because we have no other option; we hope because we literally cannot live without it. It gives us life, empowering us to endure unimaginable pain, to see improbable possibilities that somehow sometime become realities, to fail miserably and then to get up again to try once more, to laugh and cry and hope and dream, and to know moments of intense joy. These powerful emotions are fueled by hope, Godly hope.

For Christians, this is the night in the history of our salvation that signaled the return of hope's invincibility, for this is the night on which Christ was born. Tonight is the night when God comes seeking us—and not just once two millennia ago in a far away land but right here, right now in this place. Most of us learned either through direct teaching or more likely through experience that the religious journey is about our finding God—and in part it is, of course, our search—our seeking and searching for God. But somehow the search became about us. We got the notion that we make it work by believing this way, worshipping that way, or behaving in this manner—all in hopes that some magic formula of belief and action on our part will finally result in our "finding God." The task has seemed and is monumental. The miracle of Christmas is that God comes *in search of us*. Isn't that amazing? It is as though God is saying, "Here I am; I have come with great news delivered in the unlikely form of a simple child: you who were lost are now found."

One time at Disney World, my son, Brian, now in his thirties with kids of his own to torment him, got away from us somehow. He was old enough for us not to be clinging to him every second, just almost every second. Somehow while we were waiting in line at that awful Country Bear Jamboree in sweltering heat, with me wondering loudly why anyone in his/her right mind would be there, in the blink of an eye he was gone, vanished, nowhere to be seen. Even before he knew that he was lost, we sought him with all that we were and all that we had. Every breathless cell of our being was directed to reconnecting, to finding this one who was the center of our lives. We did, of course, in a matter of several minutes that seemed to last a couple of days. He was engaged with Minnie and one of her friends not far away. To this day I can remember and feel the physicality of my relief upon finding him. Most parents have had such a moment.

I know that comparing God's love to the love of a parent is imperfect and fraught with limitations and complications, but how better to imagine it? Even if we had lousy parents or have not been great parents ourselves, each of us can fathom on at least some primal level the need of being found and particularly being found by a loving parent. And though our being lost in the labyrinth of life is much worse than a momentary misplacing at Disney World, I wonder if God's yearning for us to be home, to be with God, to bask in the warmth and promise of God's love is not somehow like this. Even we as human parents are not whole when separated from our children; is it likely that God is less than that? I don't think so. Our lost-ness, our separation, grieves God.

Christmas finds us—every year it finds us—in good years and bad years. Christ comes into the world where we live to bridge once and forever the great barrier between the transcendent, God, and the created, us. Christmas is the Feast of the Incarnation, the Feast of God's coming among us, finding us—not the Feast of a new and more complicated system of hiding from us through a series of special codes, but coming in the most ordinary way imaginable, coming as a baby, coming as Emmanuel, “God with us.” The Holy Grail is not hidden from us; it is right here with us, shown to us again and again by God, who delights in our being found and wants us to live as people of eternal hope.

That promise, my beloved sisters and brothers, is Good News indeed, Good News about which the angels still and maybe particularly this year sing: “Glory to God in the highest heaven.” The outrageous claim of Christmas is that our being separated from God is simply not acceptable to God; God wants us near and goes to unthinkable ends to accomplish that desire. The truth of humankind, of course, is that, like Brian, we shall from time to time—and actually quite often—wander away, sometimes far away into places where being found and finding become almost impossible. But that is a truth about us, not about God. Christmas promises that God does not simply wait for us to come home but looks for us, refusing to allow us to be permanently lost. For on this night good news for **all** people has come into the world.

It is Christmas; the Christ-child has come again. The tragedy in Newtown still exists; the losses are deep and will be forever; but today I received a couple of photos of the Children's Pageant at Trinity Episcopal Church in Newtown. The play went on because the story is not complete; somehow even if it is a tiny beam this Christmas Eve, the light of hope still shines, and it will forevermore. A great darkness has dampened the light, but we have not lost hope. And we never shall for hope cannot be extinguished.

Merry Christmas, my friends, for Christ is born!

In the name of God: *Amen.*

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*For information about St. Bart's and its life of faith and mission  
write us at [central@stbarts.org](mailto:central@stbarts.org), call 212-378-0222, or visit [stbarts.org](http://stbarts.org).  
St. Bart's, 325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022*