



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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At Christmas, Everything is Possible

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 25, 2016
Christmas Day—Based on John 1:1-14*

Merry Christmas! A warm welcome to you this Christmas morning.

I would like to recognize you for being here. For showing up. Something has drawn each of us here this morning. It surely would have been easier to stay home, nestled all snug in our beds. Or at least home in our pajamas and reindeer slippers, savoring leisurely coffee and Christmas goodies. Perhaps enjoying the warmth of family. Or not ... it may be that some of us are maxed out on “the warmth of family” and church provides a sanctuary in more ways than one!

Some of us are households of one and live alone. We want—and need—to be part of a community. Some of us are traveling. I know some of you make Christmas morning at St. Bart's a tradition and join us every year. Welcome back!

Christmas is a time of great joy and celebration. We pull out all the stops to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, to celebrate God's loving us enough to come into the world in human form. *The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.* At Christmas we celebrate the birth of hope itself.

We need that hope. Because the joy and celebration and light of Christmas don't ignore the reality that there is also darkness. Our country has had a hard year. Our world has had a hard year. Some of us personally have had a hard year. We may have lost someone dear to us. We may have had a health scare or an actual health crisis. We may have lost our home or our financial security.

We come seeking the warmth of community and the reassurance of our faith tradition. We do need to be part of something larger than ourselves, to anchor our lives to what gives our life meaning. Like the shepherds drawn to kneel at that out-of-the-way manger, we have all been drawn here this morning to kneel at this not-so-out-of-the-way manger.

As delightful as the cultural Christmas wrapping can be, my guess is what draws us here this morning is our need for the real Christmas, the heart of Christmas, which goes deeper than the cultural wrapping, enjoyable as that can be.

We find the heart of Christmas, the true promise of Christmas, in these soaring words from John's Gospel: *What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

One night earlier this month, I was home with the television on, vaguely listening. What I was really doing was waiting for my PBS series to begin while puttering around at various tasks in my apartment. Suddenly I

heard a voice on television say, “At Christmas, everything is possible.” My head snapped around. To these priest ears, that sounded like a theological statement.

The statement came from a story on CBS’ “60 Minutes” about the recent peace achieved between Colombia’s government and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARQ), the rebel guerilla force. [1] This was the longest running war in the Western hemisphere (52 years), leaving over 220,000 dead and millions displaced. Colombia was one of the most violent and isolated countries on earth—infamous for cartels, cocaine, kidnapping. That’s darkness.

Some thought this war would could never end, certainly not peaceably. But the impossible happened. The war was brought to an end, without a shot being fired. Turns out, Christmas played a big part in that.

Ten years ago, the Colombian military hired a creative ad executive, Jose Miguel Sokoloff, one of the best “ad men” in the world, to create a series of campaigns and TV commercials to convince the guerillas to surrender and to convince the Colombian people to accept them back. Like most Colombians, Sokoloff had been born during this war and had grown up without knowing a day of peace.

First, Sokoloff did research. He found guerillas and actually listened to what they had to say. To his own surprise, he found compassion: he realized the rebels were in a kind of prison themselves; they couldn’t go home, couldn’t get out of this. He realized the guerillas were as much prisoners of their organization as the people they held hostage.

In December 2010, Sokoloff launched the “Operation Christmas” campaign. This involved helicoptering into dangerous rebel territory. They decorated nine huge trees with Christmas lights. Each tree was also rigged with a motion detector that lit up the tree and a banner when the guerillas walked by at night. The banner read: “If Christmas can come to the jungle, you can come home. Demobilize. At Christmas, everything is possible.”

A year or two later, their second Christmas campaign: challenging when your target audience, hiding in 150,000 square miles of jungle, is heavily armed and can shoot at you. They discovered the rivers are the highways of the jungle. So they asked people in nearby villages to send messages and gifts to the guerillas. The messages and gifts were placed inside small round watertight capsules that glowed in the dark, then floated down the river: 7000 lights ... Rivers of Light. That’s light in the darkness.

For their third Christmas campaign, Sokoloff and his team realized there is no voice more powerful to us than that of our mothers. In 2013, Sokoloff found 27 mothers of guerrillas. They asked these mothers for photos of their sons and daughters as young children, photos that only they could recognize. At Christmas, flyers with those photos were placed all over the jungle. The message: “Before you were a guerrilla, you were my child. So come home because I will always be waiting for you at Christmastime.”

With each of these Christmas ad campaigns, and a highly successful football (soccer) campaign, more guerillas put down their weapons and came home. Finally, just recently, after several failed attempts, Colombia’s Congress was able to pass a peace deal with the rebels.

During this process of peaceful demobilization over the past ten years, Colombia has been transformed from a place no one wanted to go or felt safe in to a country where foreign investment has more than doubled and tourism has almost tripled. That transformation remains a work in progress. Drugs and violence are still present. But light continues to shine into the darkness.

The Word became flesh and lived among us.

At the heart of Christmas is God’s presence with us. God’s active, continuing presence with us.

God is keeping God’s promises, even when that is hard for us to see. Could God be working even through governments, and ad executives and former math majors who become mayors of cities?

Could God be working even through us?

Christmas tells us: YES. Christmas tells us God is with us, active in our world. God, who took on human flesh as a helpless baby born to poor parents, continues to act in surprising and completely unexpected ways to bring peace and justice and love into the world.

Christmas reminds us we also have our part to play in God's work in the world. As I was reminded this morning: "There are two ways of spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that reflects it." [2]

"Like Mary, we can say 'Yes' to the new, uncertain reality that promises true freedom. Saying 'Yes' to God will always mean more than we can possibly imagine, both for us, and for others. Walls and stumbling blocks that seemed impassable crumble suddenly, as we let our fears go. Like Mary, we have no way of knowing any of this. We can ask for courage, however, and trust that God has not led us into this new land only to abandon us there." [3]

At Christmas, all things are possible. I would go even further and say that BECAUSE of Christmas, all things are possible. The hope and light of Christmas are born in our hearts over and over again.

Merry Christmas, my friends.

[1] Full story here: <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/60-minutes-colombia-after-civil-war-lara-logan/>
My further comments are drawn from this story.

[2] Edith Wharton

[3] Published in "Fourth Tuesday of Advent" by Paraclete Press. From *God with Us: Rediscovering the Meaning of Christmas* by Kathleen Norris, edited by Greg Pennoyer & Gregory Wolfe.