

Reading and sermon Dec 14, 2008  
"Tripping the Lights Fantastic"

## Nativity

"There is an irrational romanticism that takes hold at this time of year. Somehow, no matter how meticulous our sense of control and reality may be, our practical memories annually leave us, for visions of old dark and peaceful night, 2,000 years ago. Of course we have had a lot of help. Ahmal and his night visitors, tell of the shepherds keeping their flocks by night, and of the Magi, bearing gifts, seeking that sacred place of promise. The little drummer Boy raps out his haunting beat on a homemade drum of animal skins and tree bark. Amahl and the Night Visitors sings the praises of a man we never knew.

All of this energy, the best the artistic world can create culminates in a stable filled with straw, occupied by two parents admiring their newborn child, surrounded and warmed by the breath of simple creatures in a spectacular display of reverent silence. A great star fills the night. All the universe is still, centered on this moment.

That is the way we envision it over and over again.

The story is acted out, everywhere, from its basic telling one person to the next age after age, right down to living nativities, with actors, orchestras and animals of all species. That night, we imagine quietly, in our own ways as there is nothing more deeply personal than the arrival of a brand new life, especially under such extraordinary conditions. Every Church that celebrates the Christmas traditions also has a history of its efforts to re-create that perfect scene, we too have. Several years ago Robert Littlefield, The Director of music at The First Parish Church in Beverly, Massachusetts shared with me some of his first memories of re-enacting Christmas at First Parish. He recalled, one small human sheep, adorned from head to toe in synthetic wool, who bellowed with an intensity capable of shattering glass, because this adorable little lamb, wished to be a goat. There was the infamous year that First Parish Beverly produced and directed a live nativity in the sanctuary. It was a magnificent affair as the sheep and ducks and geese and chickens loaned from a parishioners farm, surrounded the manger, so beautifully, peacefully natural, as one might imagine it could have been on that first Christmas Day. This eclectic ensemble of animal life and human technology surrounded the manger in perfect unison, perfect until the vibrant, powerful, almost primitive thud of the tympani skillfully pounded out its ever rising crescendo, brought all in attendance to a marvelous peak of anticipation. Then the trumpeter stood and blared forth, complimenting the deep resonance of the kettle drums, a perfect melding of Brass and Tympani, as if summoning the angels, from the depths of the galaxy. Simultaneously, a large duck, gathered amid the livestock, as if on cue flapped its wings, catapulted into the air, and upon reaching the arch of its flight, emitted a loud QUACK and fell to the ground, dead. The musicians unaware of the unscripted drama unfolding in the manger continued to bring forth their magnificent call. The sheep panicked, somewhere between the first and the third movement and scattered, fleeing down the aisles and relieved themselves, everywhere as they piled up against the entry door. I don't think the ducks or sheep or chickens ever rehearsed with kettle drums and trumpets. Robert to this day, is most grateful now in retrospect that there were no camels in attendance!

Inside us all there is a Christmas Pageant, a perfect story, a vision, one which we hold dear inside, which we shall keep forever. Then there are those stories performed year after year. Memories of children's antics, mispronounced lines, rampaging uncooperative animals, of long rehearsals and costumes stitched at 2:00 am. Of human sheep that would rather be goats and of real farm critters which would rather not be there at all in this alien arena of strange noises, rows of pews and carpeted floors. In real life we gather, every year with scripts and plans and rehearsals and dreams, of memories stored away of our past Christmases in celebrations of the greatness of every new life, together.

SERMON:  
Tripping The Lights Fantastic  
December 14, 2008

When John Milton coined the phrase, to "Trip the light fantastic," in his poem L'Allegro written in 1632. He meant.. " to dance nimbly, to move in musical accompaniment, " Come and trip it as you go, On the light fantastic toe."

I do not believe Milton could have imagined the metaphors that phrase would conjure in the 21 century, especially at Christmas time! The dance I am referring to is the one that is repeated every year at this time. It is the quick step that precedes the hanging and draping of long strings of lights, as they become precariously wound around ones legs. In the process of avoiding breakage, it is a spontaneous waltz of arm waving, gyrating and side stepping away from the tangled coils to avoid smashing the fragile little bulbs, that adorn this season of lights. We have come a long way from the holiday soirées and ballroom extravaganzas of yesteryear and this morning I would like to examine the ways in which we, today, trip the literal lights fantastic. From the simplicity of the single lantern and soft candlelight, to glorify this most sacred of holidays, we have entered into time where a mere flip of the switch has replaced the simplicity of the candle.

There is a section in every town at Christmas time, that competes for the most outrageous light display ever recorded since the first light bulb glowed in Thomas Edison's shop! Maybe it's some kind of a contagious disease that infiltrates unsuspecting victims, generated through the excess of electrical current and passed from one neighbor to the next until the entire neighborhood is infected. Every year it gets worse with the added invasion of all those lawn inflatables that don't inflate during the day and lie around like multi-colored dead things, lawn kill, if you will, waiting for the coroner to take them away! My niece thinks they are beautiful.

I think they are a disgrace!

I am a fan of candles in the windows and a real green wreath on the door. With good reason, I am a decorators nightmare! However there was the year that my whole neighborhood was lit up. Everyone, except for me.

I finally succumbed to the pressure, or blight or whatever it was that changed normal everyday people into swirling, blinking, flashing utility mongers and I decided that I too would light up my mothers house, for the first time. There were old lights in the cellar. A huge tangled ball encased in spider webs that sported the big old horsy colored bulbs. You know, when one went out they all went out. No way was I even going to attempt to untangle that mess! Off to the hardware store for a few strings of mini white lights. I truly love Christmas and most of the atmosphere that it brings, the music and carols, the good will and fellowship but I have to admit there is one area of yuletide expression that really rattles my sensibilities. It began years ago in BJ's. I had gone to find a particular book that I knew would be much less there, than at Barnes and Noble. Right along side the book aisle, was a massive display of artificial, singing, dancing mini Christmas trees, none in sync with the next...each wailing their own fuzzy off-key version of a different Christmas Carol. Next to the trees were mobile talking Santa's babbling away and last, but not least quote "musical" light strings bellowing out of tune muted, electronic renditions of "Silent Night." The din was awful. As looked around me the customers passing by wore an array of painful, expressions on their faces screwing them up in distaste as if they had all simultaneously smelled something bad! I really tried to ignore the racket that was supposed to resemble the epitome of the Christmas spirit, but the longer I poked through the books the more agitated I became, forgot what I was "looking for and just wanted OUT. I am not sure whether it was the butchering of 'O Holy Night' or the babbling Santa sporting a six pack that finally did it, but somewhere in between the two, something snapped ...

I couldn't stand it any longer and before I could regain any element of control I lifted up the red faux velvet cover and crawled under the mile of tables, found the outlets and began to unplug

each and every display; tree, Santa, reindeer, lights, music boxes... everything and worked my way to the end until there was not one iota of singing plastic left to assault anyone's senses. When I finally emerged from the other side, mission accomplished, covered with dust kitties and looking like a mad woman, my fellow shoppers were stunned, motionless, catatonic, frozen in place staring at me, in disbelief as if the silence was almost too much to bear. As I stood and dusted myself off I was, suddenly very aware of what I had done and half expecting store security to take me away, dust kitties and all. Then someone began to cheer and clap and was joined by every customer within hearing range of the aisle from hell. I slinked out of the store somewhat embarrassed, but It was a good deed that I have continued to perform in any and all places where plastic singing adornments surpass the government recommendations for safe decibel levels that grossly misrepresented- represented the true spirit of Christmas. Eventually I did hang my lights. They were quite lopsided and the colors weren't quite right. As I expected the end result was the epitome of bad taste, even in a tacky environment, my display was the worst of the worst, an eyesore among eyesores. A Martha Stewart anathema!

My house did indeed stand out amid the rest. Not because there were too many lights but too few, haphazardly scattered about in all the wrong places! Obviously my very first public statement of the celebration of Christmas was a miserable failure! As I finally stood in the street and looked back at the sparseness of my endeavors, I asked myself, "Why did I even bother?"

Later that week I relayed the story of my sad fiasco, to my fellow ministers at a monthly gathering of "The Reverend Mothers" as we called ourselves and they all laughed and agreed, it sounded awful..! everyone that is except Lucinda Duncan, Minister of the Follen Church in Lexington, MA. She repeated my words several times, "Why bother? " She finally repeated once more, "What if the shepherds just looked up at the angel and said, 'Hey go bug someone else, we've had a long day ... were not going anywhere!' What if the wise men peered at the map and the star and decided that it was just too far to travel; "stars come and go, no big deal, besides it's just some poor kid and his parents stuffed into a manger in an old cave ... maybe next time!" And so on, until the idea of Christmas never happened because no one could be bothered to be there to make it happen." Lucinda had a point. My display may have been a disaster, but lets face it, the first Christmas was no tribute to the glitz and glamour of our own reenactments of that first Christmas Day! There are very few stage managers today who would have conjured up such drab scenery and simple props had there been no such script to follow. Besides, who would have come to see the play? Everyone knows that animals on the set, as first UU Beverly discovered, can be a real problem. Furthermore, the message is far too simple for modern technology to leave in its alleged original form. All of our own props have little to do with the real story, what really preserves our traditions are those that remind us that someone bothered to go out of their way to prove to us that we were special, be it on Christmas, the 4th of July, or just on one ordinary day for no reason in particular.

Christmas is indeed a dance of the human spirit, to grab our partners and dance up a storm, a time to be bothered, to be inconvenienced, to re-arrange our plans to accommodate someone special, be they known or unknown to us. Especially it is an opportunity to give lasting and permanent gifts whether we set out a single light or a thousand to dispel the darkness.

My you be bold this Christmas and, do your thing in gladness ... trip the light fantastic ... welcome the opportunity, and be very glad you took the time to be bothered, because someone, be they a stranger or friends, will surely notice.

So be it  
Amen

H Baylies 2008