

WHERE LOVE IS BORN

Texts on Christmas Eve, 2011

John 1: 1-5

When my father died many years ago, his was the closest death I had yet known. I was struck—I still am—by how humble the thing is, to have to die; to have no say in this utmost matter of receiving final orders from an unyielding authority while everyone is watching: *You, now; give it in.* No wonder the word *humble* and the word *human* share a root—*humus*, the ground, the dust of the earth. Yet here is something. When we regard a person humbled, love grows in us. Even for one dead, and more for the living. Unless we are very afraid or conflicted with denial, seeing in truth what is humble reveals our whole nature, earth below and sky above. Indeed, heaven and nature sing, for only in our humbling do we see the holy birth on Christmas morn.

Now, too many sweet Christmas carols and cute nativity scenes can gum our ears and blind our eyes from this miracle. Gravity can get the best of us. Part of us wants just to hold on to a lovely, peaceful night; or just to watch the children, for whom the night is still magical; or just to shop or shop-keep, for in the stores, the night is still full of possibilities and profits.

But for a moment, do not redeem the stable scene with saccharine. See that husband Joseph feeling the shame in poverty and unplanned pregnancy, who cannot supply the young woman with a birthing bed. She, still new to the ways of women, with no midwife but only this well-meaning man she hardly knows to guide her through birth's perils, which are, for poor women now as then, a violent river dangerous to cross. And once this Styx was breasted, where to lay the baby boy? The feed trough? husband asks.

Did it happen like this really? Yes and no. The gospel of Matthew says not—and others tell the beginnings in other ways. No one can ever know certainly how Jesus was born. But certainly this—yes: In humbleness and poverty and insignificance. If only Luke saw his story as he told it long years later, when by the Spirit of cross-and-resurrection, he'd come to know by heart the Word worth all the world, what of that? Luke's story is one with God's Word: *Suffering is the ground from which Love is born.* You know this is so; don't let it go. This is the most precious gift, in which heaven and nature sing: Suffering is the ground from which Love is born. It is the perfect melody in the song of the stable and the baby in the hay. For we are beasts who know nothing at all of good or evil—dumb as donkeys, harsh as hyenas—until we see that suffering is the ground from which Love is born.

Now, it is still night, which bears some advantage, for you can see some things better in the dark: stars, for example, and prayers. What is the dark?

Shall we say? Part of how humble it is to be human shows up in the simple fact that without knowing whom I prick with a prayer, I will pin a tale upon your beastly burdens:

Shall we pray?

For the mother not here, the father or child not with you: whether for distance, disease, death, deployment, disaffection, divorce . . .

For the love that has collapsed this year like a tower misbuilt on sand.

For the bitterness of living married with a stranger who carries no love to the house, no wood to the stove.

For minds gone wandering into darkness beyond the light.

For teenagers, feeling confused and unloved, who run toward a cliff.

For those who push and push to get their way, their win, their money, till the gift for sifting right and wrong is gone.

For men who hit their wives and do not stop;

For women learning how no more to bear it.

For people disabled and imprisoned—more by others' disregard than by their own infirmities.

For those who face a verdict from the body: M.S., cancer, heart attack, arthritis, AIDS . . . Oh, how these words like blades of diamond have severed the past that was from the time to come.

For those who play at solitaire, though they had rather have been good at hearts.

For those who have buried life's mate: and we hardly know how to watch with you the silent play of a thousand memories gone winking into night.

And on we might pray. And should. And will. But enough for now.

If it seems to one that to pray of hard things is not the Christmas spirit, I bid you see it by another light tonight. Indeed, it is just for this! we have the silent night. We can only hearken to the herald angels because the dark is dark with humbling. If God be born into this world house with an eye open for all who suffer here, then God is God as you had not dared hope—God who has left a light on that you might find your way through any night, from that first to this last, and give thanks. Only this has made men shout for joy and women mother Christ, who see that in the ground of suffering, Love is born; and all things now grow strangely bright.

John the gospel-writer said it long ago for all the world to hear: "This life was light for all. The light shines in the dark, and the darkness has not overcome it." It is on all night.

Rev. Stephen H. Phelps

© 2011 Stephen H. Phelps

*The Riverside Church
in the City of New York*