

# Christmas Eve Sermon

The Rev. C. Dean Taylor

December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2015

St. Catherine's Episcopal Church

Time: December 24, 10:15 p.m.

Place: Parish Hall, St. Catherine's Episcopal Church, Marietta, Georgia. In our imaginations, at least, on THIS Christmas Eve it is cold, (as it *should* be!), and a light snow has fallen.

The glass door opened, and heavy boots stamped the entrance way as an older man and his wife entered. He is heavy-set, with jeans and a red checkered shirt, partially covered by a yellowed unzipped coat.

He is Tom McMann, and he was cold, and, as it turns out, Tom McMann was angry, angry at his wife, who followed close behind.

With one car in the shop, they had to share a car that night, and she forgot to tell him that she had a job to do that night, a job at this Episcopal Church, St. Catherine's, to help with the babysitting. To make a little more money, they had agreed to that long ago, and God knows they needed it, what with his salary from the job as a—what did they call it now—a sanitation worker.

Sounds so nice, so respectable and, what, clean, he thought, and he laughed a humorless laugh. That's it. It sounds clean. But garbage is garbage, and a garbage man is a garbage man. That's all there is to it.

And it broke your back, day after day. And now, instead of having a nice, warm night at home in their double wide trailer, a time to sit and flip channels to his heart's content, he had to drive his wife to this whatchamacall it church.

“What kind of church has a service in the middle of the night?” he said out loud. “M-m-m” his wife answered, and he realized that she, too, was tired.

2.

As soon as he had taken a step inside the door, he saw several people around one of the Christmas trees, picking up grocery sacks, ready to deliver somewhere, he guessed. As he saw them, he suddenly realized how out of place he was. "These People are in nice clothes," he noticed. Nice people, people who had had nice turkey dinners that night, with bottles of red wine, and nice napkins and trays of dessert.

And he could see it all, but of course, he saw it as the trash for the next week, the turkey bones, the dressing, the crumbs and the napkins, mixed with the bags and bags of Christmas wrapping paper.

He could see it clearly, because that was his job. To take care of everybody's trash. Sometimes he thought that, no matter where he went, or no matter how dressed up he got, that people could see through it, and he thought maybe that people could see that it was really he who was the trash to be taken out.

But there was a nice lady with black hair and an honest, good smile who stood in the room and shook hands with the both of them, his wife, and with him.

"Are you going to the service?" she said, and the question surprised him so much that he absolutely did not know what to say. "Oh, he'll be helping me, I guess", his wife said, saving him.

But he didn't want to help with the babies. He really didn't know what he wanted, except to be back home. The nursery was down a hallway, and his wife disappeared into the hall. And the nice lady left for the Church service.

The other people soon left with their groceries, and he found, to his relief, that he was alone. Just him, some chairs and tables, the tree, and one sack of groceries that had been left behind. The room lit up in bright neon.

On the top was a package of Oreo cookies, and he thought for a brief second about walking over, taking out his sharp pocket knife, cutting a hole in the package and getting a cookie or two, but he was just too tired to even move.

3.

He could hear, upstairs, the sound of organ music, and the soft muffled sound of human voices, “Was to certain poor shepherds in fields as they lay, Noel, Noel, Noel, Noel, born is the King of Israel.”

And soon, the weight of all the day’s work settled on him like a heavy blanket, and he leaned back in his chair, with his head against the wall, and felt the wonderful, graceful gift of sleep settle upon him, and he faded away.

“Sir”. He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Sir, please excuse, but could you—could you, for just a minute...” He opened his eyes and saw a woman standing there, a woman and her husband. It was dark; someone must have turned some of the lights out.

She had a shawl wrapped around her head, and her face was dark, and thin, and he realized that her words had an accent that he had only heard on TV shows.

“Pleeze sir,” said the woman in an uncertain voice, and he could see the husband moving back slightly into the shadows. And it struck him immediately that these two were not only “not from around here,” but maybe, he thought hurriedly, maybe they were Arabs. Or even those Syrian folks that people were so worked up about. Maybe Muslims. Maybe terrorists. Most surely dangerous, that political guy had yelled about on TV.

But one look at that hollow, hopeless face told him that these two were anything but dangerous. They were, in fact, quite gaunt and obviously hungry, with a kind of desperation and despair of the poor, a look that was the same all over the world.

“May we get some of these food?” the woman said. The man still said nothing, but looked at the floor, and Tom could see that they were ragged, and exhausted. And scared.

“Sure, I guess”, Tom replied, looking around for some authority to turn to. But it was just him.

4.

“Sir, would you please to hold my baby?” said the woman, and it was only then that he noticed that the woman held a tiny baby in her arms. He looked at the child and realized to his shock that the baby had just been born, probably within hours. She had wrapped the baby up in newspaper, and around that, a Kroger sack. The newspaper, he could see it was the Atlanta Journal Constitution, still had streaks of blood from the birth, and this shocked him.

But it was part of the strangeness of this night that he held out his arms, and the woman carefully, gently, placed the baby in his arms, and he could feel the baby’s weight.

“It weighs about what a sack of flour weighs”, he thought, and he settled back into the chair and gently rocked the baby back and forth. The baby’s eyes opened, and two bright eyes stared right into his, without blinking, for the longest time.

“Look at those eyes”, he said out loud, though the parents were busy picking up the sack of groceries and looking around to see if there was anything more.

He had just never seen a baby look at him like that, just, just look at him, as if the child were looking right into the middle of him. “Ah, this is crazy”, he thought to himself, and looked away. But he looked back.

And this is the part that, later, he thought must have been a dream. Surely, it must have been a dream. Because, as he held that baby and looked into its eyes, it seemed to him suddenly that they were the eyes of all the babies that had ever been born.

Or maybe, he thought with a wild thought, all the babies that are going to be born? All the babies, the human beings that *ever were* or *ever will be*. All wrapped up in this one child.

His mind raced wildly. Or, maybe, he thought, maybe they were the eyes of God Himself? He realized that now, his own eyes were wide open, staring at this, this miracle child, his mind raced with thoughts, senses, feelings—but even more than all of that.

5.

It was as if, looking at this child, the very air itself was suddenly full of voices and music, and creatures somehow in flight, with silver and golden wings, beings so incredible and wonderful that he knew immediately that he would never be able to describe the sight to anyone, if he tried the rest of his life.

Soon they were so bright he had to squint his eyes to keep the dazzling light from blinding him. It was as if, in all of that light, and, what was that, music? As if all of that light and music and wonder somehow was all because of that child, that...child.

And it came to him, as real as anything in his life, that, with this child, that everything was different. That all things were possible. And he felt, as he later would say to himself, he felt, that he was holding in his arms, Love. Love itself. *He was holding love in his arms.*

He took a deep, long, breath, a breath that went to the bottom of his toes, and with that breath, his eyes closed, and something like fire moved over him like a wave, a gentle wave.

And he put his head back against the wall, and, still feeling the holy weight of the child, he slept.

“Tom. TOM. Time to go home.” His wife shook his shoulder. “He blinked, looked, and blinked hard again. The lights were neon bright again.

“Where’s the baby?” “What baby?”, she said. “That baby that was here a while ago.” The couple that got food.” “I don’t know anything about it”, she replied. There were about a million kids down there tonight”, she said, “and I’m glad it’s over.”

“But the kid with the eyes, and the man and woman who were here. It was clear as a bell”.

“Honey, you’ve been dreaming. It’s O.K. Let’s go home.”

But it wasn’t O.K. Maybe it was only a dream. Homeless Muslim Syrian Refugees don’t just show up in the middle of the night and usher in angels. How absurd.

6.

And yet, as they pulled out of the driveway, he stopped, put the car in reverse, and turned around, back into their parking place. “What on earth are you doing?”, his wife said.

“I want to know—I have to know—if those groceries are still there. If they’re gone...”

He opened the car door, got out, but then stopped. And Tom McMann laughed, a good long, deep laugh.

“What’s got into you?” said his wife.

“It doesn’t matter if the groceries are there, or not,” he said.

Because Tom McMann knew, without a doubt, that, either way, nothing in his life would ever be the same.

“Merry Christmas, Love,” he said to his wife, and smiled.