



St. Paul's Episcopal Church - Delray Beach, Florida

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2008 (7:30 PM and 11:00 PM Services)

Isaiah 9:2-4,6-7; Ps. 97; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Preacher: The Reverend William H. Stokes, *Rector*

“The Risk of Birth” - a poem by Madeleine L'Engle¹

*This is no time for a child to be born,
With earth betrayed by war and hate
And nova lighting sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.*

*That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;
Honour and truth were trampled by scorn –
Yet here did the Saviour make his home.*

*When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by greed & pride the sky is torn –
Yet love still takes the risk of birth.*

In the name of the Father and of the Incarnate One, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It was not a time for a child to be born
In the days when Caesar Augustus
ordered all the world to be enrolled
Ordered each to go to his own town, so he, or she
could be counted
Not because they were of intrinsic worth,
but because they had something to offer:
taxes
taxes for the Empire
It was not a time for a woman to give birth.

It was not a time for a child to be born
When Herod, puppet King, Architect
manipulator extraordinaire,
rudely dispatched three sons and one wife,
to assure one king's throne,
his own
and diligently inquired of wise men wandering

where boy wonder might be found
so that he might go
and dispatch him too,
It was not a time for a child to born.

It was not a time for a child to be born
When Joseph of indiscernible age,
lineage of David
(that and a subway token would get him what?)
set out for Bethlehem with adolescent Mary
mystically, mysteriously pregnant
set out for a place he did not know;
like Abraham of long ago
set out as many young parents do
with insufficient funds
in the midst of a housing crisis
It was not a time for a child to be born.

It was not a time for a child to born
The people walked in darkness great
Had not seen light, any light,
for as long as the oldest could remember
Sickness, and poverty and Roman occupation
blanketed the whole earth
or at least the earth they knew, first century Jews
who lived in Jerusalem, City of Peace
in Nazareth, Chorazin, Capernaum, Magadala
and Bethlehem, little town, sleeping, but not comfortably.
It was not a time for a child to born.

But there they arrived, the two, or three of them,
or three in one
Mary, Joseph and the Son,
long awaited, gestated.
There they arrived in the ancient town
And in the fullness of time, the moment came
for the child to be delivered
Delivered to whom?
That remains to be seen.

She gave birth to her firstborn son
Wrapped him in swaddling clothes
and laid him in a manger
because there was no room for them in the inn.
Was it a time for a child to be born?

The angel said "Thus so!"
said, Lo!"
To shepherds abiding in a field.
lying under stars
Perhaps even, *the star* rapt in conversation
which as Auden made clear
in his Christmas Oratorio (not Bach's),
was conversation we should not take too seriously,
neither take seriously their songs.

"Their purpose is," Auden's third shepherd said,
(speaking of the songs and conversation)
"to keep us from watching the clock all the time."

First Shepherd opined, "For though, we cannot say why, we know something:
Will happen:
"What we cannot say," Second Shepherd piped in.
"Except that it will not be a reporter's item
Of unusual human interest," Third Shepherd cautioned.
"That," First Shepherd declared, "always means something unpleasant."
Presciently, with a wink Second Shepherd concluded,
"But one day or
The next we shall hear the Good News."²

Was it a time for a child to be born?

Gong of heaven rings³
Angel of God sings
to pastors unsuspecting
"Fear Not!
Behold, I bring you best of news.
Great joy for all people.
To you is born this day in David's City
A Savior, Christ, Messiah, Lord.
Yahweh, Source of Love
Has passed judgment
The time has come
A child is born.

See the sign that this is so
You will find him cloth wrapped,
Lying in a manger
Go!
Bread of life,
He is your food.

Manna from heaven.⁴
The time has come, the child is born.
Go! Go!”

Suddenly, a multitude of heavenly host
danced across the starbright sky
singing praises glorious
to God on high
and hopes of peace
and war to cease.

They went with haste, the shepherds all
And found, as told, within a stall
Mother Mary, and Joseph faithful
infant wrapped, their newborn one,
Emmanuel, incarnate Son
In the Beginning was the Word
And the Word was with God
And the Word was God.
And the Word became flesh
and pitched his tent among us⁵
a child born in the days of Caesar Augustus
Light shining in the darkness of long ago.

Is it a time for a child to be born?

Aged couple, well-heeled, depression steeled
worry about economy and challenges of fixed income,
They have their doubts
Is it a time for a child to be born?.

Distracted in a middle pew
is one who hurts, is anxious too
“Cancer,” they had said.
“Will I live?” she asks
Is it a time for a child to be born?

Jack in the back
Has just been sacked.
They shut off his phone
He’s not alone
Is it a time for a child to born?

There are those without a home
Like a Son of Man all alone

Nowhere to lay a head
Foxes have holes, the birds have their nests⁶
Is it a time for a child to be born?

A teen to the right
Confident, hope-filled but
of limited sight,
text messaging
Lost in hormonal love
types words,
but might he miss THE WORD
spoken to him, for him?
Will the Word go unheard, as Eliot famously asked⁷
Is it a time for a child to be born?

Idolatrous certainties
certainly failed
on which too many
staked their lives.
Cost of living up
Home prices down
Stock market volatile
Madoff Made off¹
Regulators asleep
Money cheap
Work force cut
Sickness, poverty
hatred, genocidal tendencies
blanket the earth
Families in need
Iraq, Afghanistan,
Corporate Greed
Who or what will
bail out the bail out?

Is it a time for a child to be born?

Yes.
Yes, indeed.
It is time for a child to be born
Just the right, a most acceptable time⁸
for this child
Light shining in the darkness.
Our darkness, yours, mine, the world's
Shining into the darkness of our uncertainty
Calling to us "Fear Not! Take Heed!"

It is time, a most acceptable time
for love to born, to pitch his tent right here.
Emmanuel. God with us, Prince of Peace.
May he be birthed in you this very night
and fill you with his radiant light
and cast away your darkest fears
and fill your hopes and dry your tears

Pray, greet with joy this Christmas morn
For unto us a Child is born.

A very blessed and joyous Christmas to you and yours.

Endnotes

1. L'Engle, Madeleine "The Risk of Birth" from in *The Widening Light: Poems of the Incarnation* editor- Luci Shaw (Wheaton, Illinois: Harold Shaw Publishers, 1984) 13
2. Auden, W.H. "For the Time Being - A Christmas Oratorio" from *Collected Poems* Edited by Edward Mendelson (New York: Vintage International, 1991) 347.
3. The image of an angel's "gong" was taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Kathleen Gannon at St. Paul's Episcopal Church on the 4th Sunday of Advent, December 21, 2008
4. See John 6
5. See John 1
6. Matthew 8:20
7. See Eliot, T.S. *Ash Wednesday - Part V* from *The Complete Works* (New York, etc: Harcourt, Brace Javanovich Publishers, 1952) 65
8. 2 Corinthians 6:2
- 9 The reference is to a \$50 Billion Ponzi scheme engineered by Bernard L. Madoff who was arrested in December of 2008.