



From the Pulpit: December 24, 2021

Christmas Eve Traditional Candlelight Worship

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Isaiah 11:1–9

Certain Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, V: London

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

back at them. It took them three tries to get it right, but their wrong answers were wrong in the best ways.

Kathy said, “Because of Prince Albert!” Prince Albert, of course, was the German royal who married Queen Victoria in 1840, which made him Victoria’s Prince Consort. In 1840, only Germans had Christmas trees, so Albert probably homesick, brought a Christmas tree to Buckingham Palace, and this charming tradition caught on instantly among the English. That’s not what I had in mind, but it was a good guess.

Taylor said, “*Love, Actually*,” which was also a great guess, because it’s one of the great Christmas movies and the city of London is like another main character in its cast of hundreds. *Love, Actually* is positively Shakespearean in its rambling riot of romances. What’s your favorite line in *Love, Actually*? Mine is “Eight is a lot of legs, David,” says the family seamstress to Hugh Grant’s Prime Minister after sewing an octopus for the Nativity Pageant. *Love, Actually* is not what I had in mind, either, but it was a great guess.

What I had in mind, of course, was the London streetscape of 1843, with all its splendor and squalor. Did you ever wonder how Charles Dickens came up with all his vivid orphans and charming cripples? *Oliver Twist* and *David Copperfield* and *Little Nell* and *Pip* and *Esther Summerson* and of course *Tiny Tim*.

Mr. Dickens was a bit of an insomniac, so many nights a week, he would get out of bed and walk the streets of London obsessively—twelve, sometimes twenty, miles a night. He had a country home in Kent, and at least once walked from his country home in Kent to his city home in London. It’s 30 miles.

My family asked me why in my sermon series, London is one of the Semi-Sacred Symbols of the Season, so of course I put the question

During his nocturnal perambulations, he would see the sights of the city—toy stores and candle shops and the blacksmith and, most famously, the corner grocer with the Christmas turkey bigger than the little lad who fetches it for Bob Cratchit. But also of course, he would see a battalion of beggars and scullery maids and chimney sweeps and orphans. That's where Tiny Tim comes from.

So a Victorian streetscape has become a Semi-Sacred Symbol of the Season. When I played a word association game with my staff a couple of weeks ago, and I said, "Christmas," Sandy Wells from the financial office instantly responded, "My Christmas Village." At Thanksgiving, Sandy starts building this elaborate Victorian streetscape that takes over her whole house. Scores and scores of different houses and shops and churches and a working railroad.



When Charles Dickens died in 1870, the minister who spoke a few words at his private graveside service called *A Christmas Carol* the greatest charity sermon that's ever been preached. Yes? As the years rolled on and Scrooge's Night of Nights soared ever higher in popularity, they started calling *A Christmas Carol* The Fifth Gospel, because it captured so completely and shrewdly the spirit of Christmas and the meaning of Jesus himself in the four **biblical** Gospels. I love thinking about it that way: The Fifth Gospel.

Charles Dickens was the greatest champion of neglected children in the history of literature since the Bible itself. *A Christmas Carol*, for example, reminds us that all it takes to change our minds, our hearts, our behavior, and our very lives, is a little child, the baby in a manger or a cripple with a crutch.

The prophet Isaiah predicted the Messiah's arrival 800 years before he came down to Bethlehem.

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
nor decide by what his ears hear;*

*but with righteousness
he shall judge the poor,
and decide with
equity for the meek of
the earth...*

*He will have a pro-
nounced, prominent
preference for the poor,
and he will decide
with equity for the
meek of the earth.*

So this Christmas, let a little child reorder your perspective and your priorities, your own child as she tears into a pile of presents beneath the Christmas tree, or Tiny Tim, or, best of all, the shoot from Jesse's branch, the Christ Child in the manger.

I've read a lot of books and treasured many precious quotes in my day, but I think my favorite clip of them all is that scene when Bob Cratchit returns with Tiny Tim from Church on Christmas Eve. Mrs. Cratchit asks her husband, "And how did little Tim behave?" And Bob Cratchit answers, "As good as gold, and better. Somehow, he gets thoughtful, sitting by himself so much, and thinks the strangest things you ever heard. He told me, coming home, that he hoped the people saw him in the church, because he was a cripple, and it might be pleasant to them to remember upon Christmas Day, who made lame beggars walk, and blind men see."