

“THE CHRISTMAS CAROL”
by the Rev’d. Dr. Patrick R. Close, December 24th, 2003

Merry Christmas! We gather tonight to celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ! Don’t be fooled by the warm weather this evening, it is December 24th! Tonight, in the darkness, we hear about the light ... the light of God come into our world. We hear the messages of the angels, “Don’t be afraid! I’m bringing you Good News of JOY for all people ... the savior is born this day!”

This night we sing songs in celebration. The songs speak about the Incarnation. We hear songs about “Emmanuel”, God with us. We call these songs “carols.” They are familiar, comforting and they tell us the story of the birth of Jesus Christ. Last night, a small group of teens and adults from Grace Church went caroling around Haddonfield. We were warm, wished for snow and enthusiastic. We walked, we talked and we sang!

We made several visits during the night. There was the family who lost a loved one, the family with small children, the long time parishioners, two very sick parishioners who can’t get out and a widower. We went to people who needed to hear about the JOY God has sent into the world. We were giddy and well received!

Christmas carols are a gift. I know that we complain about how early they begin each year. It seems like October launches the Christmas season no a days! I heard more than one person say this week that they couldn’t wait until it was December 26th ... when the carols would stop! But Christmas is more than a day. It is a season! Do the carols only represent the commercial season to us or are they more?

I have been caroling with church groups for many years. It’s become, dare I say, a “tradition!” I have found great joy in this simple act. However, we all know that Christmas can sometimes feel like a burden. There are all those things to do ... presents to buy, decorations to put up, food to prepare ... it can be overwhelming!

I remember one year in a former parish I got a call. It was the chaplain from a nearby hospital. He needed help. No one would come and carol at the hospital. Last year no one came at all. There were several other churches nearby, but no one was available. I had met the chaplain while visiting a parishioner who was in long-term care. He asked me to come. I have a weakness, I just can’t say no.

I tried to muster up the youth group. I got my daughter Jennifer, two other teens and the youth minister. Everyone else was too busy, too overwhelmed, too preoccupied with other things. Well, you know what it’s like. I was disappointed, discouraged and tired. I really didn’t want to go. I could have stayed home. I could have rested during this busy season. I could have done anything else ... but I went anyways.

The chaplain met us at the entrance. He was so happy to see us. He said we would stop at each floor and sing at the nursing station. Off we went, the five of us. At the first floor, there were a couple of nurses and two patients. As we sang, patients and visitors stepped out into the hall. I was amused to see people mouthing the words along with us as we sang! When we finished, I went over to a woman in a wheelchair. She had a bandaged head. I wished her a Merry Christmas. She smiled, said her name was Jean and told me

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her birthday was December 25th! As we left the floor, the chaplain told me she had no family. He also said that she had a brain tumor. The doctors didn’t expect her to live after the surgery, but she somehow made a wonderful and miraculous recovery! I felt a surge of joy as he talked.

We continued to the other floors. Our singing met with the same reactions. We had one more stop to make. It was the 4th floor where the long-term patients resided. The chaplain was paged over the speaker system. He stopped to make a phone call to answer the page. When he returned, he asked us to go to ICU. It seems the doctor on duty heard we were singing. He asked us to come by and visit. The chaplain added that this was the first time the doctor had ever asked or expressed interest in the help of the chaplain’s office. We arrived at ICU and sang to the doctors and nurses. A few visitors drew back the curtains so the patients could hear us better. One patient, Martha, made a special request via her son. She asked that we please sing, “Joy to the world!” We sang ... and there was JOY!

We went to the 4th floor. One of the long-term patients was a parishioner, Norma. I asked the kids to make a special visit to her. She was an old woman, a former teacher. She never married or had children. We went into her room, where her caregiver was feeding her. I asked Norma if she would like any special carol. “Silent Night!” she quickly asked. We sang. When we finished, Norma spoke to me in her usual soft voice. “That’s my favorite carol. I first heard it when I was a little girl ... visiting the Von Trapp family (of the Sound of Music fame!). I was stunned by the story. I never knew! Joy struck again.

We ended our tour by visiting the dining room on the 4th floor. Patients, staff and visitors joined us. The fatigue and disappointment of earlier in the evening was gone. It was replaced by the warmth of joy. We sang. After we finished, I asked the kids to greet the patients. Many were very sick, lonely, without family or friends. I approached one woman who was sitting. Her name was Mary. She softly took my hand, pressed to her face and kissed it. Then she whispered, “Merry Christmas dear! Thank you!” We both experienced joy.

That night filled our hearts with the true spirit of Christmas. We sang about our loving God. A new joy was brought to us. The carols reminded us of the gladness of the season. No group is too small. No gift is too little. No song is without its own joy. God’s joy came to us. We call that joy Jesus. God came to us in our sickness, our sadness, our grief, our fear, or despair and our disappointments. God spoke long ago. God saw the tiredness and sadness of the world. God sent light into our darkness. The light came as a song. It came with the voices of angels. God sang ... And new life came into the world as a child.

I got a call from the chaplain after Christmas. He thanked me for the visit and singed. He said it lifted everyone’s spirits. He asked me if I remembered the ICU patient Martha. I said yes. He said she died early Christmas morning ... then he paused. I sensed that there was something else to come. He said the family was there. The son said his mother

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spoke some last words. Through his tears, the son asked if he could share them with the chaplain. The son said that he could barely hear Martha speak at the end. Her eyes were closed and he saw her lips moving. He bent down to listen. As the son drew closer to his mother, he heard her say, “Joy to the world ... the Lord has come...”

Joy has come into our world. Joy has come straight from the center of love. Joy has come in the form of a child. Joy has come as a savior. It is a joy that surpasses our wildest dreams, our most passionate desires and our fondest hopes. This night is about JOY. It’s a joy, joy, joy, deep in my heart ...

Joy to the world, the Lord has come, let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room and heaven and nature sing. May this joy be yours this Christmas! Merry Chrstitmas.