

Christmas Eve 2009 C

St. Matthew's Episcopal Church-Warson Woods

Text: John 1:1-18

"The Light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it." John 1:5

Tonight we gather to remember and relive the Nativity of our Lord. It has been called the "greatest story ever told." And indeed it is. One of the characteristics of a great story is that it gives birth to other great stories. These stories shine like a beacon and reflect the eternal truth of the original story, making it come alive in any day and any time.

Tonight I want to tell you such a story. It is a true story and it is a story that begins in horror and ends in hope.¹

The time is World War II. The place is a Japanese internment camp on the island of Sumatra. The man reporting this story is named Willem Brandt, a Dutch citizen, one of many that were held captive during the war. Willem was imprisoned in a shack, packed in with 100 other prisoners, where they were starved and abused.

The shack was a place where there was no light that penetrated the darkness. To be brought out into the tropical sun was excruciatingly painful and blinded those whose eyes knew only darkness for long periods of time. The prisoners had been held so long that they no longer knew the day or year. They were too sick, too hungry, too weak to care what day or year it was.

Willem had a shack-mate who managed to keep one precious possession safe from the guards and other prisoners. It was a wax candle. When the man couldn't take the clawing in his stomach any longer he would get out the candle and eat little pieces of it. He promised small pieces to Willem when Willem's hunger got to be too much.

One day, somehow, someone learned it was Christmas. It was not an exciting discovery. He told the other prisoners in a rather deadened, flat, matter of fact way what day it was. But then he said something else; he said "Next Christmas we will be home." That one statement stirred long distant memories. Another prisoner added, "At Christmas, candles burn and bells ring."

¹ "And the Darkness Comprehended It Not" Willem Brandt

That night, very late, the shack-mate was restless, antsy, and then he got up, got his little white wax candle and did something very dangerous. The man went out of the shack, without permission, risking being shot on the spot, and brought back from a dying fire a burning sliver of wood.

Willem's companion lit his candle and slowly the shadows receded a little bit and the men, emaciated and ghostly looking began to gather around it. There were two men in the shack, a pastor and a priest. The priest looked at the little flame and said, "It is Christmas. The light shines in the darkness." The pastor then added, "And the darkness did not overcome it."

Willem writes: "That night, around this candle, it was not a written Word of centuries ago. It was a living reality, a message for this hour and for us, for each one of us...for the Light *was* shining in the darkness. And the darkness did not overcome it...There was something extraordinary about it. And that flame—it was a flame that reached to the sky, in which we saw things not of this world.

The candle burned higher and higher, its flame growing more pointed until it reached the ridgepole of that high dark shack and then it went right through it up to the stars, and everything became white with light. So much light no one has ever seen since. And we felt ourselves free and lifted up, and did not know hunger anymore. The candle had fed not only my friend and me, that candle had nourished and strengthened us all. There was no end to the light. And when someone said softly: "Next Christmas home," we believed it this time unconditionally. For the light itself had brought us that message; it was written in fiery letters in that Christmas flame...The candle kept burning all through the night. There is no candle in the whole world that can burn so long and so high...That candle saved the lives of many of us. We then knew it was worthwhile to go on, that somewhere, at the end, for each one of us a Home was waiting."

What Willem and the other men experienced and saw could not be described for a long, long time. It was too fantastical, too otherworldly. No one would believe them anyway.

But those men knew what they saw. The Christ child came to them, of that they were all certain. The Christ child came to them, lived among them and was there for them. And then something else happened that he cannot explain either...the men, all 100 of them heard singing and bells peeling.

Where the angelic voices came from, where the bells were peeling, Willem didn't have a clue...and still doesn't to this day. But of one thing he is certain; that 100 men could not have the same hallucination or delusion.

Is this story any harder to believe than the story of the brutality and horror that was World War II? If the depravity, the desolation, the darkness exists in measure beyond our comprehension cannot the Light of the World exist and show himself in ways we can barely fathom?

One candle, shared with others, gave them all the hope to go on. One candle, one ordinary, plain white, wax candle, became the revelation, the birth of God into their world.

2000 years ago a Savior, our Savior, was born by starlight. Seventy years ago the same Savior was born in the hearts of 100 men by candle light. Tonight let us pray that God will be born in us so that we can continue a great story...*the greatest* story the world will ever know.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, cannot and will not ever overcome it.

Amen.