

## FROM BETHLEHEM TO JERUSALEM

INTRODUCTION      The meditation this evening begins with the simple observation that it is not far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem - geographically speaking. The way the road winds between these two places, it is perhaps a distance of nine miles. The way the crow flies, it is little more than five miles.

Many a modern American traveler to the Holy Land is somewhat unprepared for the compactness of the land where the drama of the Bible was first enacted. From our country which expresses extremes in distance by the phrase, "From New York to Los Angeles" we go to that country which expresses extremes in distance by the phrase "From Dan to Beersheba". We are talking about 3,000 miles; they, in Palestine, were talking about 150 miles.

NOT FAR - IN TERMS OF MILES      Therefore, to one like myself who has never made a hobby of studying maps and charting distances, it came as a surprise to arrive in Bethlehem less than forty minutes after we had left Jerusalem. Almost instinctively, in the Holy Land, one's memories and recollections of the Bible, dormant though they may be, snap to attention and pass in parade formation. And most of all in Bethlehem, of course, one's thoughts travel back to that time and place where Mary brought forth her first born son, and they called him Jesus. And it comes to you too, as you ponder the Christmas story that the wise men didn't have far to go once they reached Jerusalem and asked Herod for directions. They were as close to Bethlehem as Yorkville is to Riverdale.

Most of all, it came home to me how short the distance is between the place where Jesus was born and the place where his earthly ministry came to an end. To be sure, the Holy Family went back to Nazareth and it was there in that area where much of his ministry was carried on, where he grew up. But there was always that pull toward Jerusalem. And when we read that "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem" - we know that this was not an unusual direction for him to travel. The chances are that he was familiar with the city, perhaps making annual pilgrimages to the city, completely at home in the Holy City, well acquainted with the temple and its surroundings. Then one day he came to the city and from the Mount of Olives looked out over Jerusalem and spoke those unforgettable words from the depth of his heart:

"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not".

I wonder if on that occasion he looked out in the direction of Bethlehem and reflected upon what a short distance it was from the place where he was born. For you see, it isn't far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem - in terms of miles!

NOT FAR - IN TERMS OF YEARS      Suppose we look at this from a slightly different angle. It was not far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in terms of years. Thirty-three years we are told between the cradle of Bethlehem and the cross of Jerusalem. Thirty-three years. Think of it. No - it's not very far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in terms of the years involved. And this is a fact we're apt to overlook as we think of the meaning of Christmas so largely in terms of the infant in the manger. Eleanor Slater has indicted us for our near-sightedness in her words addressed to Christ, entitled, "December 24th":

"Tomorrow you are born again who died so many times.  
Do you like the candle-light, do you like the chimes?"

Do you stop to wonder why men never see  
How very closely Bethlehem approaches Calvary?"

To be sure - everybody loves a baby, and part of the joy and wonder of Christmas rests in the fact that God came down the stairs of heaven with a little child in his arms. But how unrealistic and how unimportant Christmas is if that is all there is to it.

Once at the conclusion of a Christmas pageant a little girl of three came up to me, clutching a candy cane and with bright stars in her little eyes, said: "Mr. Clarke, this is for the baby Jesus.....when he grows up". For all of her delightful naivete, the child saw farther than some of the rest of us who were purring about how lovely Mary looked and how well the shepherds had done, and how clearly the wise men had sung.

We need to be reminded that Jesus did grow up, and in the powerful and persistent strength of manhood, proceeded to challenge old laws, old traditions, old deep-seated prejudices. He challenged the status quo. He made people uncomfortable by asking them about their values, their influence, their souls. He issued some invitations to a costly discipleship with an RSVP attached. And when some little men could no longer stand in the white light of his expectations, then in the shadows of the darkness, they plotted how they might get rid of him. If Jesus had remained a baby in Bethlehem or a boy in Nazareth or a harmless preacher of pious platitudes he would never have faced a cross in Jerusalem. Hallford Luccock use to say:

"Jesus never got into trouble because he said, 'Consider the lilies of the field and how they grow'. He got into trouble because he said, 'Consider the thieves in the Temple and how they steal!'"

How often at Christmas do men deify the baby Jesus only to deny the man Jesus days later. How easy it is for us to sing, "Away in the manger, no crib for his head, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head" - and how hard to sing: "O young and fearless prophet, we need thy presence here....amid our pride and glory to see thy face appear".

How many places there are even in our nation where people this Christmas will make a big fuss about the baby Jesus....only to turn their backs on the ideals and the values he proclaimed....the things for which He stood....before the Christmas decorations are taken down.

One of the great Christmas questions we need to face is not so much what we think about the little baby asleep in Bethlehem's manger, but rather what that strange and noble figure outside of Jerusalem might think of us. Do we readily want him standing by our side, raising questions about the way in which we treat our family and friends whom we know, about the way in which we treat our fellow-man whom we do not know, about the way in which we make and spend our money, about the way in which we handle our resentments and our hurts, about the way in which a nation handles its problems and arranges its priorities.

At times I wonder how much we really want him.

So much of the world grows still this night to hear again the story of the infant in the manger, but how little of the world really goes on to hear the story of the man from Nazareth who steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem and to the degree that we welcome Christ as Judge and the Lord of all life - just so do we grow with him in the years between Bethlehem and Jerusalem - the years between the cradle and the cross. For Him - it was not very far or very long between the cradle and the cross, between Bethlehem and Jerusalem.

CONCLUSION      The love that he revealed, the love he proclaimed, the love he exemplified in his life in those years between Bethlehem and Jerusalem (however simply it may be explained) is admittedly costly when taken seriously. It demands more of us than anything else we try to do.

It is easier to do anything else than to take love seriously; it is easier to land men on the moon than it is to bring into being a system for distributing the goods which are essential to life in so equitable a fashion as to promote the spirit of community and fraternity in the human family. The former calls for skill; the latter for love. A nation can possess all of the "know how" in the world, but if it has not love, it is nothing - and a very dangerous form of nothing at that. It is much easier to carry out the dictates of hate than those of love. Far easier it is to get a world conflict going than to nurture a world community into a stage of usefulness in our relationships. Far easier to carry on a war than to find ways to

The three large frescoes on the eastern entrance of Rockefeller Center post end it a warning and a promise to us. Two of them show labor in action and justly celebrate its contribution to civilization. The third depicts the ceaseless upward climb of humanity and bears these provocative words:

"Man's ultimate destiny depends not on whether he can learn new lessons or make new discoveries and conquests, but on his acceptance of the lesson taught him close upon two thousand years ago".

Whether we are willing and able to carry on what began in Bethlehem nearly 2000 years ago depends upon the personal and the collective decision and action of persons like ourselves and churches like our own.

The magic of these days and the warmth of these hours will serve us well if we treat them as an introduction - not a conclusion - to the duty and the privilege of Christian discipleship. We come here to adore Him - and that is all to the good if we depart from here determined to serve him forever.

PRAYER      We thank Thee, O God, for the light that shines in the darkness, for the Christ who came into our world and who uses us to be instruments of his glory and love. As we rejoice at Christmas - without forgetting the sadness the sorrow and the heartbreak that is abroad in the world, we remember that light which the darkness cannot put out and which, if we let it, will shine in us. We ask these things in the name of Him who was born in a stable, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

## CHRISTMAS EVE ANNOUNCEMENTS

According to the word in the printed bulletin, the candles are to be extinguished at this point. However, I would like to change that word and suggest that they be extinguished following the last hymn.

Before the Christmas offering is received, permit me this moment to extend a word of greeting to the visitors in the congregation. Some of you may be worshipping with us for the first time. We welcome you and hope that we may have opportunity to greet you in a more personal way at the door following this service. We would invite you to worship with us again on a Sunday morning. We also invite you to leave your name and address in one of our guest books in the narthex.

To all of you - both members of this parish and visiting friends - there goes a very sincere wish from the ministry of this parish for a joyous and meaningful celebration of Christmas. It is our hope that as you have shared in the singing of the carols here this night, in the lighting of the candles, and worshipped quietly in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary - that you have truly felt the spirit of Him whose day of birth the world pauses to celebrate. We hope that the sense of His presence will bring the Christmas lights of love and faith, hope and joy, courage and confidence, into your life.

Our Christmas offering will be received in the next several moments. I have discovered that people are most generous in their giving at this time of year, and for your gift, we are most grateful. The ushers will now wait upon you for your Christmas offering.

## CHRISTMAS EVE PRAYER

Eternal Father, Father of all mankind, we place before this night the needs of our brothers and sisters throughout the world.

By the star of Bethlehem, we pray for those in search of truth to make them free.

By the angels' song of peace and goodwill, we ask that war may cease, that discords of suspicion, rivalry, hatred may be resolved, and harmony and mutual understanding prevail.

By Mary and Joseph and the Child Jesus, we ask thy blessing of health and wisdom, of patience and love, ~~on all mothers and fathers and children~~....of courage and perseverance on all who are present...

By the shepherds who went to see the event which came to pass in an unlikely place, direct all workers to take the way of Him who is the champion of all that is human and right and the Teacher of truth which makes men free from ignorance, fear, exploitation and insecurity.

In the name of Him for whom there was no room in the inn, we ask thy help for all exiles, displaced persons, refugees...all victims of war and destruction.

By the offering of myrrh, symbol of sorrow, be this night in every human grief, and wherever there is need in any heart.

By the gold which the three kings laid at the feet of the infant Redeemer, consecrate our possessions that we may use them wisely in the building of a better and more just order of society.

By the frankincense set on the altar of adoration in the stable of Bethlehem, let our prayers rise before Thee as incense, and our concern for the needs of all thy children be as fragrant sacrifice before Thee.

May no one feel forgotten or uncared for this Christmas. Guide us by the star of love, cheer us through the song of the angels, and grant unto each person present this hour, the abiding presence of the spirit of Christ. In <sup>h</sup>is name, we pray.

Amen

CHRISTMAS EVE PRAYER

OUR FATHER AND OUR GOD....WE LIFT UP OUR HEARTS TO THEE  
THIS NIGHT IN PRAYER AND PRAISE

THANKING THEE FOR "THE WORD THAT WAS MADE FLESH  
AND CAME AND DWELT AMONG US  
IN THE HOLY CHILD OF BETHLEHEM"

AND IN SPIRIT WE WOULD FOLLOW THOSE OF EVERY LAND WHO IN THESE  
PRECIOUS MOMENTS KNEEL BEFORE THE HOLY MANGER WORSHIPPING  
THE CHRIST CHILD AND CELEBRATING HIS COMING INTO OUR WORLD.

MAY OUR LIVES NEVER BECOME TOO CROWDED THAT  
NO ROOM IS LEFT TO RECEIVE THE GLAD  
TIDINGS OF THIS HOLY SEASON...

MAY OUR EYES NEVER BECOME BLIND TO THE GLORIOUS  
LIGHT THAT APPEARED OVER BETHLEHEM LONG  
AGO THAT ATTRACTED THE WISEMEN FROM THE  
EAST

*GLORY TO GOD*  
MAY OUR EARS NEVER BE ~~DEAF~~ TO THE ANGELIC  
CHORUSES THAT SANG OF OLD "GLORY TO GOD IN  
THE HIGHEST AND ON EARTH, PEACE AND GOODWILL  
TO ALL MEN"

WE ARE THANKFUL FOR THE SONG THAT HAS BEEN IN THE AIR OVER  
THE PAST FEW WEEKS OF THIS ADVENT SEASON....AND MAY  
SOMETHING OF THAT SONG BE OUR HEARTS THIS EVENING  
AND AS WE DEPART FROM THIS PLACE MAY WE CARRY  
IT TO THOSE WHO ARE IMPRISONED BY SO MANY OF LIFE'S  
EXPERIENCES....THE SICK....WEARY....DISCOURAGED...  
THOSE WHO ARE LONELY...THOSE WHO HAVE NEVER REALLY  
HAD A CHANCE IN LIFE....

AND BE NEAR TO THOSE OUR LOVED ONES AND FRIENDS  
FROM WHOM WE ARE SEPARATED IN THESE MOMENTS BY  
DISTANCE BUT FROM WHOM WE ARE NOT SEPARATED BY  
THOUGHT LOVE AND CONCERN....

HASTEN THAT DAY WHEN THE STUMBLING BLOCKS TO PEACE THE WORLD  
OVER MAY BE REMOVED....HASTEN THAT DAY WHEN MEN  
EVERYWHERE SHALL BE BOUND TOGETHER IN MUTUAL LOVE  
AND A MUTUAL DESIRE FOR PEACE. WE ASK ALL THIS IN  
THE NAME OF THE CHRIST CHILD WHO FOR SO MANY IS THE  
ONLY WAY, TRUTH AND LIFE.

## BENEDICTION

May the joy of Christmas fill your days with gladness.  
May the peace of Christmas take away your anxious care;  
May the light of Christmas shine through your deepest darkness.  
And now may the love of Him who was born on Christmas day go with you in all your ways. Amen

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## ANNOUNCEMENTS

until the end of the service.

To all of you - both members of this parish and visiting friends - there goes a very sincere wish from the ministry of this parish for a joyous and meaningful celebration of Christmas.

It is our hope and prayer that as you have shared in the fellowship of this night, in the singing of the carols, the lighting of the candles - and worshipped reverently and quietly in the haunting loveliness of this sanctuary - that you have felt something of the spirit of Him whose day of birth the world now pauses to celebrate.

We hope that the sense of His presence will bring the lights of love and faith - hope and joy - courage and compassion - flowing richly into your life. A very Merry Christmas to all of you.

Our Christmas offering will be received in the next few moments. People are most generous in their giving at this time of year and for the gifts already received from many of you, and for the gifts to be received, we are truly grateful. The ushers will now wait upon you.....

The choir - and those leading and participating in the service may find it necessary to extinguish candles. We hope you will keep your candle burning

## PRAYER

"Set a star, O Lord, in the night sky to lighten our darkness and to guide our feet in the way of peace and brotherhood.

Take flesh and blood once more upon Thyself that love may dwell among us;

Reveal thyself, O Mighty God, in small and tender things that we be not dismayed or deceived by things that tower above us.

Show forth, O Father of life, the beauty of motherhood and the sturdiness of fatherhood that our families may be clothed with sanctity.

Speak again, O God, from the lips of a child that our wordly wisdom may be chastened;

Send thy son among us, O Thou Lord of Life, that He may renew our flagging spirits and save us from disaster and the dark.

In His name and in His spirit we pray the prayer He taught us saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven;  
Hallowed be Thy Name. Thy Kingdom come,  
Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread. And for-  
give us our trespasses, as we forgive  
those who trespass against us. And lead us  
not into temptation, but deliver us from  
~~and~~ evil. For thine is the kingdom, and  
the power, and the glory, forever. Amen

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INTRODUCTION      The sermon this morning begins with the simple observation that it is not far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem - geographically speaking. The way the road winds between these two places, it is perhaps a distance of nine miles. The way the crow flies, it is little more than five miles.

Many a modern American traveler to the Holy Land is somewhat unprepared for the compactness of the land where the drama of the Bible was first enacted. From our country which expresses extremes in distance by the phrase, "From New York San Francisco" we go to that country which expresses extremes in distance by the phrase "From Dan to Beersheba". We are talking about 3,000 miles; they, in Palestine, were talking about 150 miles.

NOT FAR - IN TERMS OF MILES      Therefore, to one like myself who has never made a hobby of studying maps and charting distances, it came a surprise to leave Nazareth after lunch and arrive in Jerusalem in time for supper - for we know that it took Mary and Joseph several days to make the trip. It came as a surprise, too, to arrive in Bethlehem less than forty minutes after we had left Jerusalem. Almost instinctively, in the Holy Land, one's memories and recollections of the Bible, dormant though they may be, snap to attention and pass in parade formation. And most of all in Bethlehem, of course, one's thoughts travel back to that time and place where Mary brought forth her first born son, and they called him Jesus. And it comes to you too, as you ponder the Christmas stories that the wise men didn't have far to go once they reached Jerusalem and asked Herod for directions. They were as close to Bethlehem as Yorkville is to Riverdale.

Most of all, it came home to me how short the distance is between the place where Jesus was born and the place where his earthly ministry came to an end. To be sure, the Holy Family went back to Nazareth and it was there in that area where much of his ministry was carried on, where he grew up. But there was always the pull toward Jerusalem. And when we read that "Jesus set his face to go to Jerusalem", we know that this was not an unusual direction for him to travel. The chances are that he was familiar with the city, perhaps making annual trips to it, completely at home in the Holy City, well acquainted with the temple and its profit-mad money changers, a frequent visitor to the home of Mary, Martha and Lazarus in suburban Bethany. Then one day he came to the city and from the Mount of Olives looked out over Jerusalem and spoke those unforgettable words out of the depths of his heart: "O Jerusalem Jerusalem, killing the prophets and stoning those who are sent to you. How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not". I wonder if on that occasion he looked out in the direction of Bethlehem and reflected upon what a short distance it was from the place where he was born. For you see, it isn't far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in terms of miles!

NOT FAR - IN TERMS OF YEARS

Suppose we look at this from a slightly different angle. It was not far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in terms of years. Thirty-three years we are told between the cradle of Bethlehem and the cross of Jerusalem. Thirty-three years. Think of it. No - it's not very far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem in terms of the years involved. And this is a fact we're apt to overlook as we think of the meaning of Christmas so largely in terms of the infant in the manger. Eleanor Slater has indicted us for our nearsightedness in her words addressed to Christ, entitled, "December 24th":

"Tomorrow you are born again who died so many times.  
Do you like the candle-light, do you like the chimes?

Do you stop to wonder why men never see  
How very closely Bethlehem approaches Calvary?"

To be sure, everybody loves a baby, and part of the joy and wonder of Christmas rests in the fact that God came down the stairs of heaven with a little child in his arms.

But how unrealistic and how unimportant Christmas is if that is all there is to it. Once at the conclusion of a Christmas pageant a little girl of three came up to me, clutching a candy cane and with bright stars in her little eyes, she said: "Mr. Clarke, this is for the baby Jesus....when he grows up". For all of her delightful naivete, the child saw farther than some of the rest of us who were purring about how lovely Mary looked, and how well the shepherds had done, and how clearly the wise men had sung. We need to be reminded that Jesus did grow up, and in the powerful, persistent strength of manhood, he proceeded to challenge old laws, old traditions, old deep-seated prejudices. He challenged the status quo. He made people uncomfortable by asking them about their values, their influence, their souls. He issued some invitations to a costly discipleship with an RSVP attached. And when some little men could no longer stand in the white light of his expectations, then in the shadows they plotted how they might get rid of him. If Jesus had remained a baby in Bethlehem or a boy in Nazareth or a harmless preacher of pious platitudes he would never have faced a cross in Jerusalem. Halford Luccock use to say, "Jesus never got into trouble because he said, 'Consider the lillies of the field and how they grow.' He got into trouble because he said, 'Consider the thieves in the Temple and how they steal'".

How often at Christmas do men deify the baby Jesus only to deny the man Jesus days later. How easy it is for us to sing, "Away in the manger, no crib for his head, the little Lord Jesus laid down his sweet head" - and how hard it is for us to sing and really mean it, "O Young and fearless prophet, we need thy presence here...amid our pride and glory to see thy face appear!" How many places there are even in our nation where people this Christmas will make a big fuss about the baby Jesus....only to turn their backs upon the ideals and the spirit of the Lord Jesus.....the things for which he stood and died....before the Christmas trees have been taken down.

For example, I read in a newspaper a couple of years ago of a school board hearing in one of our northern suburban communities, a hearing which erupted into a heated controversy over the question of a Christmas observance in one of the public schools. The implication was that the original protest had been entered by a non-Christian group, but in the meeting itself the battle lines had been drawn between "Christians". The superintendent of schools, described in the article as a deacon in one of the local churches, was opposed to the observance, while an opposing group of churchmen pleaded that Christ be kept in Christmas. The tragic irony of the whole affair was caught up in this single line at the end of the article - "Police were called to restore order to the public meeting that was held to determine a reasonable solution to the problem". "Silent Night. Holy Night. All is calm. All is bright"

One of the great Christmas questions we need to face is not so much what we think about the little baby asleep in Bethlehem's manger, but rather what that strange and noble figure outside of Jerusalem might think of us. Do we really want him standing by our side, raising questions about the way in which we treat our family and friends whom we know, about the way in which we treat our fellowman whom we do not know, about the way in which we make and spend our money, about the way in which we handle our resentments and our hurts, about the way in which a community faces its problems. So much of the world grows still at Christmas to hear again the story of the baby of Bethlehem, but how little of the world really goes on to hear the story of the man from Nazareth who steadfastly set his face to go to Jerusalem.....there to be crucified not in a cathedral between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves, on the town garbage heap; at a cross roads so cosmopolitan that they had to write his title in Hebrew, Latin and Greek....at the kind of place where cynics talk smut, and thieves curse, and soldiers gambled because that is where he died....and that is what he died about....and that is where the church should be, and this is what churchmanship is all about. The cross needs to be raised again at the center of the marketplace as well as on the steeple of the church!

And to the degree that we welcome Christ as Judge and the Lord of all life - just so do we grow with him in the years between Bethlehem and Jerusalem - the years between the cradle and the cross - for Him it was not very far or very long between these two points.

#### NOT FAR IN TERMS OF THEOLOGY

Suppose we look at this now from still a third angle. It is not far from Bethlehem to Jerusalem - theologically speaking. To put it another way, it is not far from the Incarnation to the Resurrection. So short a distance, in fact, that you cannot see the former without the latter. James Cleland, Dean of the Chapel at Duke University, put it this way:

"In a sense, Easter creates Christmas. No resurrection, no incarnation". "The Resurrection made the church ask questions about God and Jesus that the Incarnation sought to answer".

In one way, every birth is important. The arrival of a child is usually greeted with joy by parents and grandparents and friends who place a new baby at the center of their world. But in another sense, the importance of any birth is determined by what happens later in the life of that person. A baby was born in Kentucky on February 12, 1809. Surely the Lincoln baby was greeted with gladness by a poor, pioneer family. But by and large the birth went unnoticed; yet because of some events later on Springfield, in Gettysburg, and in Washington - because of the way in which a man guided a nation, because of the spirit he showed in dealing with people - friend and foe alike - the date of February 12th is clothed with meaning for millions of people today.

You see, this is a small and imperfect illustration of what we mean when we say that the Resurrection lights up the Incarnation. If Jesus's life had ended with the cross on Calvary's hill there would be no real meaning to Christmas. We might have some dim and dusty traditions about an exceptionally good man who turned the other cheek and who went a second mile and who was at length put to death on a cross. But that was no all. Just when some cruel men were confident they had written "The End" then God stepped into the picture and wrote "To be continued". And so you see because of something that happened in Joseph's lovely garden in Jerusalem on an Easter morning, there is eternal power and purpose in something that happened in Bethlehem's lowly manger long, long ago.

"And the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass'. Yet, it is not just to Bethlehem that we would go. It must also be to Jerusalem - where once and for all God affirmed that "no darkness would ever be able to put out the light of goodness and truth and goodwill."

And it is then that we begin to understand what the Incarnation, illuminated by the Resurrection, says to us - that God is here, here to stay, is here with light to judge, to guide, to uphold - to have dealings in our lives - with love enough to strengthen, with power enough to triumph. And think of what that means to our lives - with their assorted fears and anxieties, hopes and dreams, failures and successes, problems and prospects - to our nation - with its clashes between ideals and realities.

Today on the 22nd day of December, perhaps your mind travels back as my mind does, to the 22nd day of last month, when the unthinkable and impossible happened to us in the loss of our President. The message of Christmas is deep enough to include even this tragic event. For it tells us that the light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not been able to put it out. This is what Christmas is all about.

SHALL WE PRAY: We thank Thee, O God, for the light that shines  
in the darkness, for the Christ who came into  
our world, and who uses us to be instruments of his glory and love.  
As we rejoice at Christmas, without forgetting the sadness and the  
sorrow that is all abroad in the world, we remember that light  
which the darkness cannot put out and which, if we will let it,  
will shine in us. Amen

inconceivable....unimaginable...  
impossible,....unbelievable....unthinkable