

*Memories of Christmas*

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve, 2008

Whitefish UMC

- † How would you sum up the meaning of Christmas? What are your most powerful memories of this time of the year? I remember my grandfather, when I was just a child, telling of Christmas in the trenches in France in World War I. Monday, visiting friends in Colonial Manor, singing, bringing cookies, we talked with one veteran of the Pacific Theater in World War II, where he observed several Christmases away from the sweetness of home.
- † But at this time of year, when we focus on the Christ Child, childhood memories seem to surface, and children are all the more precious. They remind us of our own childhood, or that of our now grown children, and they awaken memories of Christmas.
- † For we *are what we remember*, just as surely as we are what we eat. And mostly we remember the best times. For me, the best memory of Christmas is the celebration of 1976, when our son, our only child, was about eight months old. We lived in a little log house in Unionville, an old mining town in the hills south of Helena.
- † When we bought it, our first house, the only heat came from two wood/coal stoves. An old green rug that looked like alligator skin covered the pine floors. But for Christmas that year, we installed some backup heat and a new carpet. Our families were coming from far away to celebrate Christmas with us and our new baby.
- † Tom's parents came from Cincinnati, along with his great-aunt Emma, in her late eighties. His brother and girlfriend, now my best friend, came from California. My parents, my little 10-year old sister, and my newly widowed grandfather arrived from Chicago.
- † When it came time to cut a Christmas tree, we all, except for the really old folks, headed into the mountains with our beloved horse Sundancer, who pulled the perfect tree home.
- † With nine of us and the baby in the house, we needed a larger dining table than what we had. Our table we had found broken and painted bright blue in the shed on our property—the shed that had once been a livery stable in mining camp. We had stripped the table and restored it, but it only had room for a few people.
- † So my grandfather and Tom set about making leaves for the table out of pine boards, sawing them in the living room because it was so cold and snowy outside. (I'll never forget that!) Now the table could seat all of us with room to spare, and it did, with much gaiety and warmth.
- † That Christmas, the baby laughed, our elders shared their stories, and for the most part we all got along. That Christmas shines brightly in my memory, and it always will. It gleams so in my husband's memory that he even wrote a novella based on it.
- † Of course many famous writers have given us their best Christmas memories, too. I love Barbara Robinson's *Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, which I read every year

- in the bathtub. In our family, each Christmas we try to read *Stubby Pringle's Christmas*, a cowboy story that takes place in Montana in 1910, by Jack Schaefer.
- † Whatever story it is for you, there's something about it that rekindles memories of Christmas and begins the real season of celebration. This year, I am drawn to the beautiful story, *A Christmas Memory*, by Truman Capote. Yes, Truman Capote, the same person who wrote *In Cold Blood* and other gruesome stuff.
  - † Capote's Christmas Memory tells of the relationship between a young boy and his eccentric aunt, young in mind. It is their custom every year to assemble the goods necessary to bake 31 fruitcakes. Listen as the memory is evoked that November morning:
  - † *It is always the same: a morning arrives in November, and my friend, as though officially inaugurating the Christmas time of year that exhilarates her imagination and fuels the blaze of her heart, announces: "It's fruitcake weather! Fetch our buggy. Help me find my hat!"*
  - † Buddy and his aunt Sook manage to scrape up enough money to make the precious fruitcakes, soaked in bootleg whiskey, to send to President Roosevelt, some Baptist missionaries from Borneo that they heard speak once, and Abner Packer, the driver of the six o'clock bus from Mobile who exchanges waves with them every day.
  - † Buddy and Sook find it easier to relate to the people they barely know rather than to the relatives with whom they live, who find them to be a general nuisance. But they are each other's best friends, one in purpose and affection. Their Christmas story warms the chill of the winter with its love and devotion for each other and for their old rat terrier Queenie.
  - † Whatever our story, memories of Christmas transform us again to the times when Christmas held its deepest meaning. How important it is to be able to remember. One of the things we most want not to lose is our memory. It's one of the few things left to us when the people and things we most love are gone.
  - † What is Christmas, if not memories? For tonight we remember that God came to Mary and Joseph, and to us, and lived among us. We remember the poor shepherds, watching their flocks by night. How often have we watched and waited for a message from on high?
  - † All of us have known moments when we were being called in some direction, to take a certain path, or to make a change or a decision in our lives. We remember a visitation of angels, and Christmas brings back all the visitations of angels—either of the heavenly or earthly variety—we have ever experienced.
  - † Christmas helps us remember that we are made in the image of God, and that God was pleased to dwell among us, full of grace and truth. It's easy to forget that sometimes. But we are what we remember, and so this night brings that memory into focus.
  - † Don't get me wrong, I know that not all Christmases are full of good memories. In my own life, I recall that just a few years following our best Christmas with our baby son, Tom and I spent Christmas apart, separated by anger and grief. My parents had just divorced, as had my sister. We forced the celebration that year for the sake of our little boy.

- † This has been a hard year in the life of our church family. Several places at family tables will be empty of a cherished son, wife, mother, father, daughter. Christmas reality will differ from our best memories. What is left to us then?
- † Yes, we are what we remember, and we are also what we eat. It's our tradition at Christmas time to take Holy Communion to our homebound church members and friends. Kerin, Tara, Demi, and Teal went with me Monday and Tuesday to bring the Lord's Supper to those who have trouble getting to church anymore.
- † In my experience, Holy Communion is engrained even in folks who are losing their memory. This is my Body. This is my Blood. Do this in remembrance of me. This sacrament has helped us remember all down through the ages that we are one with God, and one with each other.
- † Too often the world tells us that we are dust, and to dust we shall return. Too often we remember our wounded times, or the times we have harmed others. And no matter how hard we try to forget, the memories haunt us.
- † All too often questions and uncertainties about the future worry and consume us. So tonight we remember the Baby born in Bethlehem. We remember that God loves us so much that God joins us the glory and messiness and pain of our human life.
- † We remember that Jesus came the way light comes, says John's gospel. He shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome him. In Christ, sin and death are sent packing, and we can face tomorrow with hope. There in a straw-filled manger, we remember seeing God. And even though we can't go back exactly to that time, that memory has left a mark on us.
- † That's why we have a Christmas pageant, full of the wonder and innocence and humor of children. So we won't forget. So we will see God again tonight.
- † I love this part of Truman Capote's story, *A Christmas Memory*. Buddy and Sook have just received the gifts they have made for each other—beautiful kites, and the wind is blowing. They rush outside to send the kites soaring, and Sook says, wisely:

*“My how foolish I am!” my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. “You know what I’ve always thought?” she asks in a tone of discovery, and not smiling at me, but a point beyond. “I’ve always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don’t know it’s getting dark.*

*And it’s been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all of that spooky feeling. But I’ll wager it never happens. I’ll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are”—her had circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone—“just what they’ve always seen, was seeing Him. As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes.”*

- † Memory. Is that enough? E.B.White, author of Charlotte's Web and other profound literature, tells the story of his 92-year old aunt Caroline. He and his

- aunt were sitting at lunch, and he apologized for not having taken her for a car ride that morning to see once again the bright colors in the changing autumn woods.
- † “Why my dear,” she said without hesitating, “remembrance is sufficient of the beauty we have seen.” Oh that we could be like Aunt Caroline, and when Christmas disappoints us, or we feel deeply the loss of someone so loved, memory would be sufficient.
  - † It isn’t possible on our own. But by the power of God’s Spirit, hear the angels sing again of the glory of Lord. The story told again this year of a mother, husband, little baby, shepherds, wise ones, and innkeeper help us to remember what happens to unremarkable people in a dark world when God breaks in.
  - † We don’t pretend to really understand it. But it means that now, today, we can see God’s face and hear God’s voice, and speak to God in our prayers and hopes and memories.
  - † *We are who we remember.* We are the light of Christ reflected to the world. May we be that Christ with the excitement, wonder, and joy of the children of God who remember the story and have seen him, right here, right now.
  - † *Amen.*

Sources:

Truman Capote, “A Christmas Memory,” in *A Family Christmas*, Caroline Kennedy, ed. 2007.

E. B. White, “Remembrance is Sufficient,” in *A Family Christmas*, Caroline Kennedy, ed., 2007.

Ted Berkold, “Sermon on Christmas Eve 2005,” <http://www.saint-marys.org>