

Take Part in the Story

Christmas Eve, 2011

Whitefish UMC

† For many of us, Christmas has been a long time coming. The lights went up before Thanksgiving, and if we work in retail (as I did in my early career), we've prepared for Christmas for an eternity—or at least it seems like it. But for others of us, we would postpone Christmas forever, if we could. For there are holes in our lives that hurt especially this season.

† The poet T. S. Eliot seems to capture the essence of these perspectives in the opening lines of his poem "Journey of the Magi:"

A cold coming we had of it,
Just the worst time of year
For a journey, and such a long journey:
The ways deep and the weather sharp,
The very dead of winter.

† Here in our church, we've practiced what it means to wait in hope, peace, love, and joy. But one Sunday school teacher in another town tells the story of a conversation with her six-year-olds about what the church does to get ready for Christmas. "We have a special name for the season," she explained.

† "Does anyone know what we call the four weeks before Christmas?" she asked brightly. And one little raised her hand and said "I know. It's called Advil."

- † Yes, Christmas preparation can cause stress, depression, exhaustion—along with hope, peace, love, and joy. But now it is here, and so are you. And it's time to hear the Christmas story again, and remember the reason we do all this. Much of the world listens tonight to the angels' song, the lowing of the cattle around the manger, and the infant's first cry.
- † In our early service, filled with children, grandparents and parents, and families, the pageant made the point that the story didn't just happen 2000 years ago. Instead it is meant to be our story today as well.
- † For there is something in us that wants to be part of this story, to be in the story. And not just if we are little children. My friend Dave McConnell likes to send emails with paintings of the nativity over the centuries. He likes the Renaissance paintings in which the holy family is portrayed in the artist's own town, instead of first century Bethlehem. Sometimes the artist painted townspeople, friends, in the picture. Sometimes they painted themselves into it.
- † Artists and actors have for centuries recreated the Christmas story in pageants, crèches (or nativity scenes), and paintings. My favorite saint, Francis of Assisi (after whom our puppy Francie is named), created the first live nativity in 1223 in a humble outdoor setting, and people loved it, came from miles around to see it. John Buchanan writes: “Art historians are interested in Francis because before he assembled his live nativity, with a real infant as baby Jesus, the Christ child in pre-Renaissance paintings of the nativity is portrayed as a miniature adult, sitting upright, almost regally surveying his kingdom.
- † Francis reminded his neighbors that Jesus was born like every baby and was as weak and helpless and vulnerable and dependent on his mother and father's love as any human infant. Francis remembered and reminded his

neighbors and ultimately the whole world that the essence of Christmas is that God came to earth to be with us, to be as vulnerable and weak as any of us; came to earth to share and bless our humanness, all of it—our joys, our sadness, our ecstasy, our disappointment; came to be with us and redeem and make whole our humanness, our suffering, our victories, our fears, our deaths.

- † We need to hear this Christmas story again and again. It is so simple, in a way. We believe the story because it rings true. It contains ultimate truth about ourselves and about God.”
- † This story contains truth about human life at its **most** human: A man and young woman, she heavy with child, travel from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem, a small village near Jerusalem, the ancestral home of the man’s family. There is a census, and they have traveled under imperial decree to be registered. It is a long and difficult journey. He walks; she rides the donkey, as legend has it. If they find an inn at the end of the day, they have food and shelter. If not, they stop by the side of the road and sleep under the stars.
- † “Finally they arrive in Bethlehem. The inn is already full. The innkeeper allows them to spend the night out back in the cow stall. At least they will be warm. During the night the time comes. Labor begins. He helps. She births her baby, a son, and together they wrap him in the strips of clean cloth they have brought along, and after she nurses him and they both cradle him—and each other—in their arms, they place him in the feed box, a manger, to sleep.”
- † We may not be pregnant and on the road on a donkey. But anybody could find themselves in a predicament like Mary and Joseph’s. At one point we all end up in unexpected situations, not sure what to do next. Anybody

could be and everybody is, at one time or another, uncertain and afraid of what the future will bring—for the world, for our nation, for ourselves.

- † Anyone could be and everyone of us is, in some way, on a journey, a sometimes long and difficult journey into an unknown future. It's a story about real people—about you and me.
- † And it is a story about God, a story of God coming into the world—not in the way anyone expected, not with chariots and trumpets, but quietly, simply. “It is a story that makes the most amazing suggestion: that God loves the world so much, loves the people of the world, each and every one of them—loves you and me—enough to become vulnerable, to become like us, to love us by being with us, born like us, living in the world like us, laughing and loving and hoping and dreaming like us, and finally, incredibly, dying like us.”
- † There's a beautiful song that I heard for the first time this year. It's called Mary's Song, by Lucy Shaw. Its poignancy almost overwhelms the listener.
- † *Blue homespun and the bend of my breast
keep warm this small hot naked star
fallen to my arms. (Rest ...
you who have had so far
to come.) Now nearness satisfies
the body of God sweetly. Quiet he lies
whose vigour hurled
a universe. He sleeps
whose eyelids have not closed before.
His breath (so slight it seems
no breath at all) once ruffled the dark deeps
to sprout a world.*

*Charmed by dove's voices, the whisper of straw,
he dreams,
hearing no music from his other spheres.
Breath, mouth, ears, eyes
he is curtailed
who overflowed all skies,
all years.
Older than eternity, now he
is new. Now native to earth as I am, nailed
to my poor planet, caught that I might be free,
blind in my womb to know my darkness ended,
brought to this birth
for me to be new-born,
and for him to see me mended
I must see him torn.*

- † What can we say about a God who would become one with us, even with our darkness? A hundred years after Jesus' birth and too short life, the writer of the Gospel of John wrote these words that we hold close to our hearts: "In him was life and the life was the light of all people...The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."
- † Our world can look mighty dark these days. We need to know that the love of God made flesh among us has been the best gift ever. And nothing will ever separate us from that divine love.
- † Frederick Buechner said it beautifully:
- † *Adeste Fideles. Come and behold him, born the king of angels. Speak to him or be silent before him. In whatever way seems right to you and at whatever*

time, come to him with your empty hands. The great promise is that to come to him who was born in Bethlehem is to find coming to birth within ourselves something stronger and braver, gladder and kinder and holier, than ever we knew before or than ever we could have known without him.

† Tonight we will light candles—the light passed from one of us to another. It will be dark at first, but watch how the light grows and slowly, surely fills this place with candleglow. And remember, “the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will not overcome it.” You are invited to take your place in the story and in sharing the light.

† Not just tonight, but in all the days to come. Amen.

Sources:

John Buchanan, <http://fourthchurch.org>

Lucy Shaw, “Mary’s Song”

Frederick Beuchner, Secrets in the Dark: A Life in Sermons, 2007.