

Luke 2:1-20

word count: 907

At what age do you remember being present when the tree was put up, after some struggle getting it to stand straight in the base, the ornaments were taken out of storage and you recognized them, each one of them, as occupying a role as old friends and symbols of this most special time of the year. There, tucked away in a small box is your favorite, and only you get to put it on the tree. The fuzzy bear with a Santa hat belongs to another member of the family and you smile politely as she puts it on a branch of her choosing. In another box are mismatched relics that your mother explained were on her tree when she was a little girl. Their presence here, out of time with today, became both reminder and verification that the season was laden with the deep richness of antiquity.

You learned how to make presents and wrap them, or even buy something on a splurge with your allowance—learning to use what had been given to you to make others happy. Cards came in, carols were played, and special, rich foods played a role that some of us today wish we might do without. Most of all, there was a sense that the season was inviting us to behave differently—there was more joy and wonder in everything we did.

A sense of anticipation rose...but for what? There were parallel stories to ponder; one was about the man with the sleigh, but the focus was on the other story, one that you could balance and come to claim as real and true. The story of the first Christmas is rich and full of imagery, and tonight we unpack each piece of it, remembering it from the year before like rich symbols, important pieces that we have missed and looked forward to having in our presence once again. Shepherds abiding in fields, angels from the realms of glory, the birth of the child in a rough manger, surrounded by the poorest of the poor...there is something in this story that calls us to claim it as true, Christmas after Christmas, no matter where we have wandered during the year.

It is a season of anticipation leading into joy; one that makes us want to rise up and sing songs that we would not think of singing at other times of the year—special music set aside for this week that helps us to declare the truth in the story of the birth of Jesus. Because, it is truth that we are after—not literalistic, legalistic or dogmatic, but truth nonetheless.

We sing, "*O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see the lie
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by*"

Knowing that there is nothing that is deep and dreamless, or in any way peaceful today in Bethlehem, where Mary and Joseph could not today walk past the young soldiers carrying rifles at the check-point, or move towards this remarkable birth beyond the concrete bunkers and razor wire. There is little that is peaceful in Bethlehem, Afghanistan, or Iraq.

We long to meet with others similarly summoned, to be in the presence of candlelight and beautiful music, to sing,

*Shepherds, why this jubilee?
Why your joyous strains prolong?*

We picture Shepherds' Field with a heavenly host filling the skies over this bucolic grazing ground hillside that today is set apart by chain link fences, over which has been tossed the trash and refuse of a town impoverished by injustice, where bad blood between neighbors poisons the land.

Reality, stark and real, creations of our own human failings that have caused us to fall short of the mark, whoever and wherever we are, and tonight we need balanced imagery, poetry, and the truth

that lies therein. Is it any wonder that we come so hungry to hear these words read and to sing these songs, knowing that there is real truth in them?

There is a God of second chances, there is a way that leads to hope, peace, joy and love; it is present in a situation that seems so unlikely that it must be true, because the truths we have learned from stark reality, our own interactions, as nations, have led to war, poverty, inequality and the degradation of the earth. As individuals, the reality we have created is often isolation, loneliness, bitterness and fear.

Ultimately, the truth we seek is found not in what we are and what we have done, but in what we could be and how the peaceable kingdom of which Isaiah spoke could be created...if we followed the way that leads there. The truth we come to hear tonight is found in a balance of imagery and poetry that leads to a reality we need to hear has possibilities to grow from such humble places as a manger and our hearts.

At this moment, the rich reverberation of Brian's harp is silent. The room is full of reflection and anticipation, as each of us prepares to carry the light of meaning that we have once again unpacked, a truth that has been sitting, sometimes ignored, other times overlooked, yet nonetheless present in our hearts during the year, and to be bearers of that light, singing the hope for that which we know must be truth, nurturing it and carrying it once more, carefully but intentionally into the world.

Amen.

Benediction:

Walk softly,
As you go through Christmas,
That each step may bring you
Down the starlit path, to the manger bed.
Talk quietly, as you Speak of Christmas
That you shall not drown out
The glorious song of angels with idle Talk.
Kneel reverently as you
Pause for Christmas,
That you may feel again the Spirit of the
Nativity, Rekindled in your soul.
Rise eagerly, after you
Have trod the Christmas Path,
That you may serve more fully,
The one whose birth we hail.

source unknown

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.³All went to their own towns to be registered.⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’ ¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.