

It is still Christmas! Our Church season of the twelve days of Christmas is just past the half-way mark, even while the culture around us has moved on to other Hallmark holidays. It seems to me serendipity that in the middle of Christmas – every year – we have our celebration of the New Year with all its requisite talk of ‘resolve’ and of ‘taming our bad habits’ as one headline read. I wonder if it is like a Lenten moment for those who never walk through the doors of a church – Christmas reminding us of goodness and hopefulness, and New Year’s recalling us to make better choices in our lives.

But the missing piece – that’s probably what brings you and me through the church doors today. Somewhere in there – between Christmas and New Year’s – is the message that we cannot, in fact, do life by resolve alone. It has not worked. I doubt it ever will. So we come seeking some magical power...some mysterious grace... something to carry us through our daily lives.

And here we find the story of all stories. We heard it again today. Luke’s account of the birth of the Savior never fails to move us for its sheer simplicity and beauty.<sup>1</sup>

A vision of angels scatters the darkness with celestial light, announcing the sacred birth, and a chorus of heavenly hosts praising God. The savior is born. The Son of the Most High is a baby born in a barn wrapped in cloth lying in hay. His mother ponders in her heart. I wonder if it’s the contrasts that captivate us. A messenger of God comes into this crude setting with brilliance and a commanding presence. Here the Savior of the world lies vulnerable, bundled in rags in a barn. We can recall the Song of Mary – God has shown strength with God’s arm, scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.

Could it be that the almost magical power of the story is in the way it **humbles** us. We are stripped of the pretenses of culture and the trappings of wealth and of comfort. “The vision of God in a manger turns all of that upside down.” The last shall be first. The proud shall be taken down. Perhaps the story of Jesus’ birth speaks to us deep in our hearts because it touches our essential **humanity** without all the societal rank and respectability with which we are usually engulfed. Or we are lifted out of our constructs of meaning, our contrived security.... Could it be that “we find in the simplicity of the Savior that God meets us at a very different level of our being...” Could it be that God comes to us and calls us back to our true selves, to the “fundamental necessities of our humanity...” ...to humility and honesty, faithfulness and love, and reverence “for the One who alone is holy.”

Humanity and humility – I’m sure a word study of the Greek would tell us they are related! And, perhaps the birth of the Savior is meant to bring these closer together – our humanity and humility – the core of who we are - brought together with the honesty that God desires us to have. (pause) There is something very special about how the Christmas story speaks to our hearts – and also how it invites us to have a change of heart. One writer, Rodney Hunter, describes the Christmas experience this way: (slowly)

“It’s easy to be entranced by the spell of Luke’s nativity story, enjoying the sublime beauty, taking comfort in the image of Mother and Child, the very archetype of primal love and security, or feeling inspired by its vision of a gracious God entering the human world as a babe in a manger to save us from confusion, selfishness, greed, and all the sickness and perversion of our lives. Its appeal is not only religious and aesthetic, it is also magical, as if to promise us that by reveling in its charm and beauty we will be changed, transformed from our petty, misdirected lives into something good and beautiful and true to our authentic natures. In short, there is a temptation to think that the charm of

the story will do our work of transformation for us, sparing us the need to enter into the life and work of faith.”

It’s a danger, isn’t it? To let the glad tidings of God’s salvation lure us into hoping that the beauty and simplicity will magically save us from all that afflicts us – from instincts gone wrong, from our suffering, vengeful, violent world. It seems we have a ritual hope for peace and goodwill; ...a ritual hope that bumps up against our own small lives that continue to stumble and falter in misdirected ways. It sounds like the magic of Christmas is either not working or it wears off all too soon each year.

Friends, this is why we come through these doors Sunday by Sunday, season by season, year by year – so we can be reminded that the vulnerable baby in the manger grew up to be the man who gave his life on the cross. The God of the universe makes a home here on earth. The divine child becomes a man who shows unstoppable love for everyone – no matter who you are – friends, strangers, enemies, the unwanted and outcast – he loved them all, and then on one terrible day, he died for them. ...and he died for us.

The Christmas beauty, the divine Incarnation lowly in a manger, soon becomes a life of love that challenged the Power of Darkness, cast out demons, liberated the oppressed – all while provoking violent retaliation – “and giving birth, beyond the cross....to the indestructible reality of the love of God.”

For us to hear the story aright means to hear the whole story from manger to cross, from the heavenly hosts praising God to resurrection faith and beyond, to the life of the Spirit working in us and through us in the world today. Rodney Hunter writes,

“If we are to worship the infant Jesus, we must follow him from Bethlehem to Golgotha, taking up our own unique ways of participating in his saving work, following his path of devotion to love and justice, encountering the powers of evil in the world and in ourselves, unmasking their lies and pretenses, and in the midst of it all celebrating the ultimate victory that was his and will one day be theirs who dare to follow him. The true beauty of the coming of the savior lives in the lives he touches and inspires to repent and follow him. Emmanuel – God with us – means just what it says: God with us today, in our own quest for justice and truth and love, in our own process of transformation into the simplicity and beauty of our created being.”

May God accept our resolve this New Year to be faithful to the call of Christ – to become people who are transformed by the indestructible reality of the love of God! Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Rodney J. Hunter in “Pastoral Implications” for Christmas Day, *Lectionary Homiletics*, December 25, 2005, page 32-33