

Christmas Eve 2016

Luke 2:1-20

"I'm gonna say my prayers. D'ya need anything?"

My day began with an NPR segment about president-elect Trump's tweets yesterday, which the commentator referred to as 'twitterizing nuclear weapons.' There followed the realization that the Seahawks were playing this afternoon – a Christmas Eve afternoon football game! And then came an email from my eldest son forwarding a news article from UK Daily Mail, stating that a recently discovered ancient nativity scene, carved in the wall of an Egyptian cave in the Sahara desert, is believed to predate the birth of Jesus by 3000 years.

Well. I am reminded of an old *Herman* cartoon by Jim Unger. A young boy, dressed in footed pajamas, stands next to his dad, who sits dejectedly at the table, head in his hands. The boy says, *"I'm gonna say my prayers. D'ya need anything?"*

Yes. Indeed, we do. Thankfully, wrapped in that child's question is the joy, the mystery, the wonder, the *hope* – the gifts of God in words from the heart of a child.

If we are to offer hope or be a source of light to others, we must carry hope and light within ourselves.

The uneasiness around us is palpable. The battle for life, land and people in Syria; the terrorist attack in a Christmas market in Berlin; our unsteady national government as the leaders in Washington transition. Add global concerns of political and economic instability in Europe, millions of refugees seeking new homes – all of these and more push in on us on every side.

What have we come to? What are we expecting? More of the same? Worse?

Christmas calls us to increase our sense of hope, not to wallow in worry. Pull the *hope* out of *hope*-lessness. That's not easy to do. Especially if we are compassionate disciples following Jesus' way, concerned about feeding the hungry, caring for the outcast, the homeless.

A week ago, I was on call as chaplain, and sitting at a table in the hospital cafeteria. A gentleman, noticing my clerical collar, sat down and said, *well now that it's almost Christmas, I am expected to have joy and wonder in my life. How's that going to happen?* He went on to explain what was going on in his life, why he was hanging around the hospital. Yes, I surely saw his point.

Some of my grandchildren seem to have caught on to their parents' 'less than joyous' anticipation of Christmas this year. But for them, it shows up in Santa lists with less extravagant 'wants.' And genuine interest in seeking ways to help others less fortunate – a new expression of generosity coming from our youngest citizens. That's a beautiful thing to see. And it pulls *hope* out of [their parents'] *hopelessness*.

I believe that one of the best ways to see, to find, to feel hope is through the eyes of our young people. Not just because the future belongs to them, but because they bring new ideas, new

perspectives. Identification with the resurrection, rather than the crucifixion.

Significantly, our young adults are coming to faith by choice, not through inheritance. In part, that's because of the rising secular tide, and the dwindling numbers of the very young attending church with their parents.

Thirty-nine percent (39%) of adults under 30 have no church affiliation. These unaffiliated young adults are free to be seekers, to ask questions, to wonder, to be newly curious about the divine.

Joy and wonder in God's works, curiosity about the divine, the gladness, the delight, can stay with us all of our lives, *if* we refuse to be beaten down by societal direction.

But there's the rub. Our rapid-fire internet culture pushes rational logic and materialism at us to the point we feel bereft and unvalued. As my acquaintance at the hospital suggested, real life seems to get in the way of joy and wonder. Maybe that's what Jesus is getting at when he asks us to set aside earthly things.

God reminds us what is important in the divine economy by giving the Son Jesus to the world. Mary and Joseph rejoiced together at the birth of Jesus – much as we celebrate the birth of a child in our families. We look at new life with awe and wonder.

What is the Christmas story, after all? This wandering couple finds shelter in the stable of an inn, the unmarried young woman is having a baby. What is it that the shepherds bowed before, and the angels sang about? New life. A child. God's child.

God rejoiced that holy night! God celebrated the birth of his Son!

He sent his angels to the shepherds, to the wise men, as if God couldn't wait to get the word out! '*A multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*' A birth announcement of the highest order. Good will toward men – men who like the shepherds were '*sore afraid.*' This was a scary time for the Israelites, under Roman occupation and a Jewish king who was in league with the Romans, a time of great economic disparity. God celebrated!

Let's be newly curious about the divine. Did God the Father share the *human* experience of the Son's birth as pure joy and awe? When God entered our time and space as one of us, did God fully anticipate the dangers ahead? The slaughter of the innocent children of Bethlehem by the jealous King Herod, who feared this baby would compete for Herod's earthly throne?

How did God *expect us to receive* the Son? Jesus said, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it. Is the Christmas story about *our* receiving God, our entering the Kingdom through a child?

The heroes of the Christmas story are the shepherds, the homeless couple, the helpless babe. And God.

In the best known Bible stories, God finds a new place for the weak, the overlooked, the foolish: Jacob, who was a conniver; Moses, who murdered an Egyptian and escaped to the desert; the overlooked shepherd David who became King; the apostle Paul who before his conversion persecuted the followers of Jesus.

Is the Christmas story about offering us a place to start over, to find strength in our weakness? To look at our greatest fears, and cease being afraid?

Still, Christmas is not about us. Is it? Christmas is about God acting in human history – intervening through a girl named Mary. What faith the teenage Mary must have had to say yes to God! She was given a choice, she made a choice. Joseph chose to love Mary and say yes to God.

Our lives are determined by the choices we make. We may over-think the options, second guess the results, and regret more than a few of those choices. With the New Year around the corner, we tend to use the holiday season for reflection on past choices. Opportunities squandered. Loves lost. Maybe we acknowledge the deep structural roots of injustice, and we feel helpless.

Dwelling on our poor choices will not change them.

So, maybe Christmas *is* about us. One of the best gifts of Christmas is the chance to make the choice – the choice to say yes to God. Choose to be loving and faithful people. Choose to *celebrate life* with God.

Gong back to my friend in the hospital. Hope is challenged when there are no signs and wonders, when it feels like we are living in the darkness rather than good times.

But – we can choose to celebrate because we are wonderously made. What touches us most deeply is beauty, love, art, music, the aroma of Christmas baking, the affection of community and friends. Snow falling outside our window in big thick flakes. What touches us deeply comes through the heart, not the rational mind, not the worries of our culture.

We can laugh at our own smallness in the face of nature, at the insignificance of our problems in the overall scheme of history. We can be touched with joy rather than overwhelmed by what we cannot make sense of.

Our ancestors had a dream of God. From Isaiah: “*For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us...and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*”

We dream of God. Here, at Christmas, is God's dream for us, incarnate in the Son.

In Christian Century magazine, Stephanie Paulsen writes, *we have an opportunity to enter a new year awake and alive to the presence of God in our midst, a chance to recalibrate our lives and our commitments in the light of God's vision. It is one of the greatest blessings of our faith that God seems never to tire of inviting us to begin again.*"

Here in this holy space tonight, in the cold weather shelter down the street, in the family center across town, in the Dinner at the Brick which our congregation hosts tomorrow, and everywhere else where there is love and mercy, compassion and pity, there we will find the Christ child. There we will rejoice with God. There we will experience *holy* hope.

There we will experience God's dream for us.

'I'm gonna say my prayers, d'ya need anything'?

Let us pray that God who has a dream for us will transform in us all that keeps us from living God's dream.

Amen.

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