

Sermon

MAKING CHRISTMAS

“The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.”

When we face the unknown, we make up stories about it. For most of human history, practically everything was unknown. And on cold mornings in the dark time of the year, we huddled together around the fire and told stories and sang songs, which is just another way of telling stories. Let's do that today.

All these Christmas stories. Some of them come from Scripture; the baby, the shepherds, the angels, Simeon; some of them don't; the Little Drummer Boy, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Scrooge, and a thousand others.

In the words of one of my favorite writers, Connie Willis:

“The recounting of the first Christmas (you know, the baby in the manger) has all the elements of great storytelling; drama, danger, special effects, dreams and warnings, betrayals, narrow escapes, and – combined with the Easter story – the happiest ending of all.

And it's got great characters – Joseph, who's in over his head but doing the best he can; the wise men, expecting a palace and getting a stable; slimy Herod, telling them, “When you find this king, tell me where he is so I can come and worship him,” and then sending out his thugs to try to murder the baby; the ambivalent innkeeper. And Mary, fourteen years old, pondering all of the above in her heart. It's a great story; no wonder it's lasted two thousand years.”

Of course, the original isn't the only Christmas story, or even the only phrasing of the original. There are multiple stories in Scripture; the one in Matthew, without shepherds, and the one in Luke, without wise men. And the one in John we read this morning, without any of it at all except Jesus and God. And since then, we've played thousands of variations on angels, shepherds, Mary and Joseph, wise men; and then later for good measure trees, Santa Claus, Christmas spirits, and even, strangely enough, the baby Jesus himself. Half of Christmas is a gift; and the other half we've made ourselves. That's OK; as the UCC folks say, ‘God is still speaking.’

I want to look at Christmas stories; and *the* Christmas story; through three Christmas songs. I'll sing you one, and we'll sing two together. When you listen, or sing, we'll stay seated, and I'd like you to pay attention to the words; some of these are familiar songs; you can stop paying attention when you've heard something so many times.

The first one is the Cherry Tree Carol; it's a weird old medieval miracle carol. But it's my favorite carol of them all, because of the theology buried in it. Plus it's just a lovely melody. The lyrics are in the bulletin.

<Cherry Tree Carol>

That's a strange little thing, isn't it? It's certainly not a Biblical story. It comes indirectly from stories in one of the Apocrypha; the various gospel writings which, for usually pretty good reasons, never made it into the canonical Bible.

The song begins with Joseph as an old, old man. There's nothing in the Bible about Joseph's age. I've always thought of him as around Mary's age; he certainly was young enough to have been alive and working through Jesus' childhood and youth. And there's nothing in any gospel that says that he or Mary had any particular social standing, as the Queen of Galilee or anything else. And there are lots of other bizarre things about this story; I worked on it with my guitar teacher, and he couldn't get past the notion of Jesus speaking from inside the womb. How, exactly does *that* work? Does he have a Bluetooth speaker?

But that's not the point, is it? This isn't history, it's a parable; a story with a point; no; a story with an *edge*.

Mary and Joseph, out for a walk, are chatting, and Mary, who's been sweating this conversation, picks the moment to break her Big Surprise to Joseph; she's pregnant. And he understandably

reacts angrily. “You want cherries? Let the baby’s father pick ‘em for you, then.” Under normal circumstances, things would go the usual route; sharp words, shouting, an engagement ring flung at someone’s head and cancelling the reception hall, the caterer and the flowers.

But Jesus is there.

He doesn’t condemn Joseph; he chewed people out occasionally during his preaching days, but he was much fonder of parables and demonstrations. So that’s what he does here; he has cherries delivered to Mary, direct from the tree. He doesn’t tell Joseph what to do; he just shows him the miracle and leaves him the choice. The miracle, incidentally, is a nifty parable of the virgin birth; Joseph tells Mary to have the one who got her with child get her cherries, so God does.

And to his credit, Joseph does the right thing. He confesses *his* mistake and *his* injustice; and Mary, in *her* turn, forgives him: “cheer up, cheer up, my dearest dear, and do not be cast down.”

It’s a *perfect* little parable of the gospel message; there’s judgement and condemnation; Jesus intervenes; and there’s repentance, forgiveness and reconciliation.

Yet; and this is part of the message too; Jesus’ intervention *doesn’t* miraculously make all the problems go away; Mary and Joseph walk on homeward; still with their heavy load. Isn’t it

even heavier when the carol ends? Which is more complicated, a messy broken engagement, or being the parents of the Son of God?

So, let's sing the 'Little Drummer Boy'

<LDB>

If you want to learn stuff, listen to people who disagree with you. Well, that song disagrees with me; it's why I picked it. Maybe hate is too strong a word, but I dread hearing it on the department-store Muzak. I'm a songwriter, I think rhyming everything to 'pa rumpa pum pum' is cheating. And what did the agricultural folks of Palestine do with a drummer boy, anyhow? Did he play with a kid's jazz band, or what? It's just a silly story.

Of course, nobody gives a rip what I think. Since 1941, this thing's been recorded hundreds of times, by everyone from the Trapp Family Singers to Jessica Simpson, on everything from the Bing Crosby Christmas album to 'We Wish you a Metal Xmas and a Headbanging New Year'. Yes, that's the name of a real album with The Little Drummer Boy on it. I'll pass.

Why does it work so well; for everyone else anyhow? It's easy to sing along to, of course. If you don't remember the words – not that there are that many of them – you can do the 'pa rumpa pum pums' and get more than half the lines. But the reason this has become such a popular standard must go deeper than that.

A drum-solo isn't exactly a big pile-O-gold, or three first-class tickets to Egypt, is it? The Holy Family could've really used *that*.

And most new parents, seeing a kid marching up with a blasted drum, would be whispering ‘Don’t Wake the Baby!!!!’ And if they weren’t as devout as Mary and Joseph, they might spice that sentence up with some adjectives I won’t use here.

But, it’s all the little drummer boy’s got, so he plays for the Holy Family, and then Jesus smiles on him, or maybe he imagines Jesus smiles at him; I suppose it comes to the same thing.

The edge on this story is pointed right at *us*. I suspect that most of our attempts to follow God, to please Jesus, come out much like a drum-solo for a family with a new baby. Nice; well-intentioned; but ... missing the point. And that’s the reason the song works; not, or at least not entirely because it’s a rather sickeningly sentimental story, but because we’re all the Little Drummer Boy, doing what we can, hoping for the best, but knowing it’s little enough or maybe the wrong thing entirely; just hoping for a nod from Mary, a smile from Jesus.

Trying to make Christmas.

These are both silly stories that just don’t make any sense and yet, both are immensely popular, or were in their day in the case of the Cherry Tree Carol, which has been around at least 600 years.

Perhaps it’s not *about* making sense?

One of *my* favorite Christmas stories is a novel by the late British humorist Terry Pratchett. It’s called Hogfather, and it’s

about a holiday, Hogswatch, that bears a suspicious similarity to our Christmas. I want to share a short dialogue from that book with you; it takes place between Death, who's taken the place of the Hogfather (basically Santa Claus only with tusks), and Death's granddaughter Susan. I'm not going to try to explain all that, except to say that it is NOT a modern, painfully serious novel where Death makes an appearance to remind everyone how short and awful life is; Pratchett's Death is one of the funniest characters in literature. I will try to do THE VOICE, though.

HOGFATHER DIALOGUE (Edited)

"All right, I'm not stupid. You're saying humans need...fantasies to make life bearable?"

REALLY? AS IF IT WERE SOME SORT OF PINK PILL? NO. HUMANS NEED FANTASY TO BE HUMAN. TO BE THE PLACE WHERE THE FALLING ANGEL MEETS THE RISING APE.

"Tooth fairies? Hogfathers? "

YES. AS PRACTICE. YOU HAVE TO START OUT LEARNING TO BELIEVE THE LITTLE LIES"

"So we can believe the big ones?"

YES. JUSTICE. MERCY. DUTY. THAT SORT OF THING.

"They're not the same at all!"

YOU THINK SO? THEN TAKE THE UNIVERSE AND GRIND IT DOWN TO THE FINEST POWDER AND SIEVE IT THROUGH THE FINEST SIEVE AND THEN SHOW ME ONE ATOM OF JUSTICE, ONE MOLECULE OF MERCY. AND YET- AND YET YOU ACT AS IF THERE IS SOME IDEAL ORDER IN THE WORLD, AS IF THERE IS SOME...SOME RIGHTNESS IN THE UNIVERSE BY WHICH IT MAY BE JUDGED.

"Yes, but people have got to believe that, or what's the point-"

MY POINT EXACTLY.

IT IS THE MOST AMAZING TALENT.

"Talent?"

OH, YES, A VERY SPECIAL KIND OF STUPIDITY. YOU THINK THE WHOLE UNIVERSE IS INSIDE YOUR HEADS.

"You make us sound mad,"

NO. YOU *NEED* TO BELIEVE IN THINGS THAT AREN'T TRUE. HOW ELSE CAN THEY *BECOME*?

Let's sing one more; just the first three verses. O Little Town of Bethlehem.

<O Little Town>

Of all the popular carols, this is the one I love the most. The language is wonderful, listen to the slightly ominous double-alliteration of 'deep and dreamless sleep'. There are potent contrasts in the poetry; the dark streets and the everlasting Light; the mortals sleep and the angels keep; the little town and the great glad tidings. It's *not* a song that tells a story, it's just a picture of a moment in time. And it's not even a particularly joyful hymn; it's really a cry for help in the darkness. If the hopes of all the years are met in those dark streets, so are the fears. If God imparts the blessings of his heaven, it's to a world of sin, and it's only to our hearts, not to our hungry mouths or our aching knees.

What difference does any Christmas story make?

What difference does *Christmas* make?

OK, there's that little thing about salvation from sin and death; but I don't know, slogging through the rain on my way to work, that seems a bit...theoretical. It's not that I'm denying the

importance of salvation from sin and death; you only have to subscribe to a newspaper, or just be a little introspective, to recognize the power of sin; and I've got a failing mother and all the little ailments of this time of life myself, so death's on my mind, too. But it's awfully difficult to connect a baby two thousand years ago to my blood pressure.

There *is* a connection, though. If the Christmas story means anything; all the stories, it means that Someone; the Someone; knows about our problems, and considers them worth attention. John said: 'No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.' If we know the Son through the Father; perhaps it's the other way around too. So even better, God knows our problems, not in the theoretical sense, but from the inside; from having experienced them Himself. And our response is to do what humans do to encompass experiences beyond their own; we make up stories about them. Not necessarily stories that are real, but that *should* be; for how else can they *become*?

Christmas doesn't last forever, though we might wish it to; it's just the *beginning* of the story, not the *whole* story. We like the baby in the manger and the star and the angels and the shepherds, it's pretty and sweet and joyful. But it does have an edge; because the story that starts at Bethlehem leads onward; to Herod and Egypt; to Nazareth; to the dusty roads of Palestine; to Jerusalem; to Golgotha, and a thousand places thereafter; even,

perhaps, to Connecticut. And so, we have to make Christmas here.

Let's sing the last verse of O Little Town.