

Christmas Eve 2009

12/24/2009

"A Sensitive, Vulnerable New Life"

When I think about the Christmas Story,

I always have a strange thought.

I am 43 years old, so I have really only celebrated the coming of Christ 43 times in my life. And as a regularly celebrated Holy Day of the Church, Christmas has really only been celebrated in the way we celebrate it since about 1210 AD.

So, throughout all of history, aside from the traditional reading of the birth stories of Jesus Christ on the feast day of December 25<sup>th</sup>, we have really only celebrated Christmas 800 times.

That sounds like a lot, but it really isn't that much given the whole stretch of history.

As a pastor, my constant struggle with days like Christmas is to at once honor the tradition and also to make it new again.

If you think of Christmas as a story we are waiting to hear again, then it begins to become new.

We listen for new things or how we are hearing it differently.

But in what I said is an important piece of information -

the "hearing of the story again".

We are in transition in our culture right now.

We are moving from a written based form of communication to a more visual form of communication,

a form of communication that relies on the image seen.

Much of our writing now occurs as an image on a screen, not as writing on a page.

I, for one, mourn the passing of the printed word as our way of communicating.

I do not trust images as conveyors of information.

We have lived with the printed word as the conveyor of information for almost 500 years now, so it should not be surprising that the information retrieval system is changing as our technology changes.

We have lived with books and letters for so long it is hard to imagine what the world was like without them.

But before our present image-based way of transferring information,  
and before the printed word,

people learned new things and received information

by hearing,

by the story told and spoken.

The Christmas season gives us some idea of what it might have been like without the printed word.

For centuries, eons even, the primary form of communication, the main way information was transferred was through storytelling and oral transmission.

Often, you will hear people critique this by saying,

"Have you even played telephone in a group of people?"

And of course, most of us have as children.

But we have only played such a game in the midst of a culture that relies on the written word as the conveyor of truth.

In the times of oral transmission and storytelling,  
when the conveyance of truth relied upon the spoken word,  
there was far less likelihood of error,

so the telephone example does not apply.

People were trained to remember a spoken story  
or to transmit something heard from someone else in a clear, concise and accurate way.

If anything was written down,

it only conveyed its truth in being heard, in being spoken.

In fact, for thousands of years, the written word was considered far less reliable  
than anything spoken.

So we come to a day, Christmas Day, when we surround ourselves with symbols and stories to remind us, again, why we are doing what we are doing.

And for centuries, the symbols of Christmas were merely vehicles to help people tell the story over and over again to those who would listen.

Christmas is a time when we rely upon

the story told,

the story heard,

the story experienced,

just as people used to years and

years ago.

We begin great stories by saying,

"Once upon a time, long ago"

and that is how this story begins:

Once upon a time and long ago,

in the time of Caesar Augustus,

a census was taken which required everyone to return to the town in which they were born.

In the village of Nazareth in the country of Judea, a young couple heard the command from the Roman Empire.

Mary and Joseph began a long journey to Bethlehem because Joseph's ancestors came from that place.

Mary was pregnant with a very special child.

The reason she knew this was because an Angel of the Lord came to her and told her she would bear the Son of God, the Messiah. Joseph, who was to be married to Mary, also was visited by an Angel who told him to stay with Mary and raise the child as his own.

So Mary and Joseph left family and work to fulfill at once the commands of the Roman rulers and also the prophecies of old which said the Messiah would be born in the town of King David's ancestors, Bethlehem.

The walk was long.

The way was dusty.

Mary knew she was close to the delivery of her baby.

As they neared their destination, Mary could feel the child waiting to be born.

Sharp pains came and went, but she kept silent, not wanting to worry Joseph, her husband.

Do you remember the stories of the creation of the world?

Do you remember how it was when the Lord spoke the world into existence?

The Lord said, "Let there be light" and there was light.

The Lord separated land and sea,

light and dark,

plant and animal

and spoke all of them into being

and then said of all those things God created,

"It is very good"?

Do you remember?

Well, the shepherds in the fields knew God,  
the God who created the sheep they tended,  
the fields and mountains they walked amongst,  
the stars and clouds they watched at night,  
they knew God was up to something.

They remembered God once brought light into the world

and at any moment God could bring light into the world again. They sensed the light of God which illuminated all of creation getting brighter.

Perhaps it was the moon which glowed a little brighter.

Or in the east,

there was a glowing far off in the deepest stars which was growing in brightness.

Even in far off lands of the East, that bright morning star in the deepest stars glowed and gained the attention of some purveyors of wisdom.

They saw in the far-off glow a sign that something spectacular and very strange might be happening.

Well, Mary and Joseph knew time was growing short and they knew God had great plans.  
But God's ways are not our ways and the way we do things do not always look like the ways God does things.

You and I would think the Wonderful Counselor,  
the Mighty God,  
the King of Kings,  
the Prince of Peace would be born to great fanfare  
and trumpets  
and processions

and all the things Kings and Queens and Princes of the World create for themselves so we can hold them up.

But not this King.

That is because God often works from the bottom up.

God works with the small things  
and the lowly creatures  
and people -

the shepherds,

the poor,

the blind,

the lame,

the sheep,

the creepy crawly things

and deep sea creatures -

to do the things of God.

And so when the Savior is born unto us in a manger because there is no room at the inn,  
the gathering of royalty  
is a gathering of barnyard creatures,  
a gathering of the dust we are made from,  
a gathering of the people who mean nothing to those great kings and princes we spoke of a moment ago.

And this is how God takes on flesh, born of Mary, the son of Joseph,  
born in a manger amongst animals and hay and dust.

When my daughter was born, it was nighttime and there was a strange snowstorm with thunder and lightning.

Behind the clouds a very bright comet burned through the night sky and lit everything with an eerie light on clear nights.

It was a long and difficult delivery and when she was born, she did not cry.

The cord was wrapped tightly around her neck.

But the midwife worked quickly and Rhiannon breathed her first breath.

Normally, a child cries when they breathe their first breath, because air hurts.

Light hurts.

Breathing hurts.

But my daughter didn't cry.

She smiled.

She looked around at all the people. She seemed wise beyond her years even at birth.

After a while, after her mother came out of surgery and after we had spent time together as father and daughter, I went home to pick up a few things.

I stepped out of the hospital.

It was cold

and clear

and the comet burned brightly in the night sky

and the air hurt when I breathed it in.

The light, after having spent 36 hours in a dimly lit hospital room, hurt.

I felt vulnerable, sensitive, as if everything were a long fingernail plucking a note on a guitar string.

I could only imagine how much more my daughter felt as she lay there with her mother back at the hospital.

This is what God chose to experience coming to us in the flesh, in the body and life and resurrection of Jesus Christ -

the brightness of the light and how it sometimes hurts; the sharpness of the air when it hits your skin in the morning,

or maybe after you have had a fever;

the bodily experience of pain and loss when someone close to you is sick or dying.

This constant, unending sensitivity to the subtlest of movements in our deepest being, this deep and overwhelming vulnerability to the most painful experiences of humankind, this is what Jesus experienced in his life.

Perhaps that deeply human experience was in a man who had been chained into the graveyard by his community because they didn't know how to deal with the changes which had overcome him.

Perhaps it was in a woman who had been taken advantage of by man after man, seeking some time alone at the well.

Perhaps it was in the death of a close friend, a witness to the grief of friends and family.  
Perhaps it was in a woman at a tomb who, in her grief, sees a gardener instead of the one who has come back from the dead.

The amazing thing about all of this,  
the amazing thing about Jesus, Joseph and Mary in this little scene,  
in this story we have told over and over,  
is this:

God chose to come to us in this way for us,  
for creation,  
to draw all of humankind,  
in its groaning and straining,  
to God's self.

It is in our own sensitivity and vulnerability where the God who comes in the flesh is  
most active,  
most awake,  
most new.

New life flourishes in the places where we do *not* resist the great change that has come over the world in the advent of Jesus Christ.

Where is Christ seeking you out in your life this Christmas Eve? Where does it hurt  
to breathe,  
to feel,  
to think,  
to notice where God is leading you?

Come to the waters.

Come to the embrace.

Come to the manger,  
where the Christ child awaits you,  
sensitive and vulnerable to everything that makes us human,  
so we might become truly human in the eyes of God.

This is the story we tell over and over again,  
the story we hear and listen to again and again.

And its wisdom is known in the telling and the hearing again and again.

The truth of the story is known in how Christ is present in that brightly lit, cold, painful creation we all will step into when we leave this place tonight.

But tomorrow morning, all of us will remember, once again, someone has already experienced it with us, for us.

We do not face the bright lights, the cold, brisk air, the painful, sensitive, vulnerable creation alone.

May this always be so, as often as we tell this story in remembrance of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Merry Christmas.