

Christmas Eve Sermon – 2005  
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The Christmas story is one of the great treasures of Christianity – a story told through the ages and around the world in countless songs and paintings and pageants – from the majesty and beauty of the world’s greatest cathedrals to the ineffable sweetness and just plain cuteness of our own littlest angels and shepherds and kings coming down the aisle here just a few hours ago to see Mary and Joseph and the baby.

It’s a story of a humble birth signifying God’s presence in us, in our humanity. It speaks to our longing for God to be with us and for our world to be better – for peace and goodwill among all people. We long for the message of the angels to really be true.

The Christmas story presents some very good theology in a way we can grasp it. Like the world’s great myths, it bears truth beyond logic. This is not abstract doctrine but a story we can learn as children and love for our whole lives.

The theology behind the Christmas story is that of incarnation – of God alive in our own humanity – not removed, not a distant being. And this incarnation of God in Jesus is not only for us but for a reason – to bring peace and goodwill, to be a source of joy to all people. This is what the story tells us, and Christians have understood it to be good news, very good news indeed!

Even so, there are stumbling blocks to receiving the great news the story offers. One is for us who believe, who embrace this story of Emanuel, God with us. This is the stumbling block of radical responsibility. I think that along with our longing for comfort from God and help in making the world better, accepting incarnation obligates us with enormous responsibility – the burden of being, ourselves, in the world, the body of Christ. We are, ourselves, called to be agents of divine love in and for the world; we are ourselves, each called to bring about peace, goodwill and joy in whatever ways we can, not matter how small. How do we ever live out a faith in God with us? It can feel like an awesome responsibility.

Another stumbling block can be the perceived exclusivity of the Christmas message. In our religiously heated, fractured world, we must take care that our claims about Christmas don’t imply that Jesus came for only some, or that knowing God’s love in your life must come through faith in Jesus. The experience of knowing God’s presence within us is one that has probably been around throughout human history, but the story of Jesus Christ as God in human form at a particular time and gave expression to that experience in a new way.

It is critically important that this story be heard as proclaiming that we all can know in our lives the power of God’s love – that this can come to every single person on the planet, that this offer of God’s love, of peace, goodwill and joy is for all time and all people. There is a lovely song we’ve been singing in Advent at the 5 pm service. It’s called “Star child, earth child”, and each verse names several kinds of children – street

child, spoiled child, hurt child, lost child, wise child, old child, faith child – the words express the gamut of our humanity in the conditions of our children. Each verse ends with this refrain: “This year, this year, let the day arrive, when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!”

The song is about all people knowing the experience that is Christmas, whether or not they happen to be Christian. It is the hope that all people will be touched, grasped in the depths of their being by a love that holds us tight, not only in times of peace and joy, but also in darkness and pain.

I ran across a story recently that seems to be about this kind of experience. To me it underscores the challenges I’ve mentioned about Christmas because it entails radical responsibility and because it’s about people of different faiths reaching towards each other even in the midst of ethnic and religious war. I use it also because it’s a story about a baby, and also about a cow – a bit of a wartime pageant.

It took place in Bosnia in the ‘90’s and is recounted by Chris Hedges in his powerful book War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning (a claim, by the way, that he laments as deeply tragic). This story is of a connection between a Muslim farmer and an Orthodox Christian Serbian couple who have been neighbors in a Bosnian town where people on both sides were guilty of terrible violence and hatred towards each other. The Serbian couple had lost two grown sons – one taken away by Muslim police, the other killed by a car – not an accident. At first willing they had been willing to cooperate with the Muslims who controlled the town, but once their sons were gone, they became bitter as they were increasingly harassed, impoverished and starved. There was a new baby, born to the wife of one of the sons, who was dying. The mother couldn’t nurse her, and all they had was tea to give to the infant – after five days, there seemed no hope. That day a Muslim farmer came to their door, a neighbor who had a cow that he kept hidden and milked at night. He brought them a half liter of precious, expensive milk. This was no gesture, no one-time act of kindness – he kept coming, day after day, for 442 days – 221 liters of milk. It kept the baby alive all that time until her mother could move with her away and out of the war zone. This was the power of love, given to save a small baby he might never meet, by this illiterate farmer. He wouldn’t talk or accept money, just gave the milk, even though other Muslims insulted him for helping these Christians.

Because of this, the Serbian couple couldn’t give in to the rage they felt at the loss of their sons, or at least they had to recognize how the love that saved that baby made a travesty of all the ways we erect nationalist and religious boundaries that separate us.

Eventually the tables turned in that town. The Muslim’s milk cow was killed by Serbs for meat, and he was reduced to selling apples on the street – where one day the reporter who knew the family he had helped discovered him, poor now, and shivering in a thin coat. He told the farmer he had seen the family, and the old man’s first question was just this: “And the baby? How is she?”

God's love came alive in that Muslim farmer and in that Serbian family who couldn't hate Muslims anymore because of what he did, the responsibility he took, and that love came alive in a time and a place of very bad poverty and a dreadful war. And that love came alive between people of different and too often violently opposed religious faiths.

We live now, on all sides, with the heaviness and upset and uncertainty of people at war. We have recently seen up close, way too close, the shameful poverty exposed by Katrina here in our country, just as it exists in so many other places farther away.

In welcoming the Christ child, in song and beautiful story, in the good fortune and comfort of our homes with friends and family, in glad gratitude for all of this, can we also make room for the message behind the Christmas story? For the promise and responsibility of accepting a God who lives in our world, in our very hearts, our own flesh? Can we each of us and all together, be channels for God's love and peace? However, whenever we experience God coming to birth in us, may we offer that love – somewhere, somehow, so that – to return to the song:

“This year, this year, let the day arrive, when Christmas comes for everyone, everyone alive!”