

Christmas Eve Sermon, 2006  
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The Christmas story as we have it in Luke's Gospel, brings so much of life together: the distant past – Bethlehem in a time of Roman oppression under Emperor Augustus, and today's world in a time of war. The story brings heaven and earth together – angels from the realms of glory, and poor shepherds in a field, a young mother full of life born of the Holy Spirit and her carpenter husband, ordinary, loyal, and caring. The story brings all of us here, and people all over the world together - all sorts and conditions of people - to hear the story once again.

What is it about the Christmas story that can so touch our hearts, whether we're hearing it for the first or the ninety-first time? I think maybe it's that this story is one way of answering one of the most basic religious questions: What is God like? Two small anecdotes, each one about a little girl, have prompted my thinking about how the Christmas story may help us know what God is like.

Last week, I met in the chapel with the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> graders from the Oneness Family School with whom we share our building. They invite me to do this every year just before Christmas, to talk a bit about Christianity, as their students come from many different religious, cultural and ethnic backgrounds. I always bring lots of props – vestments, a cross, a statue of St. Patrick killing a snake, but especially advent and Christmas things – the advent wreath, some frankincense, and – most popular – an incredibly tiny Christmas crèche in a single oyster shell – the whole scene small enough to hold in your hand. This was made by our own Helene Stowell, and despite its delicacy, it has been passed around by all those little hands in the chapel for many years and never suffered harm.

Anyway, I began my spiel, as I always do by introducing myself as a Christian minister and asking whether any of them go to church or are Christians. This year, as always, about a third of the class raised their hands, but one little girl, right up front, said "I'm not a Christian now, but I might be, after this!" I might be, after this – wow – what expectancy! Does our story, about Jesus, and especially his birth, really have that power?

I believe it does, and I believe all of us gathered here bear witness to that power, whether we come often or only seldom. This story, this holy night, this music, this beautiful space, all of us here, believers, doubters, strugglers, all longing in our various ways for the meaning of the story to be true. Don't we all hope, after this, to feel strengthened and comforted and confirmed in our faith, such as it is?

So what, then, does the Christmas story say? How might it answer our questions about what God is like? Logic can't answer such questions, and factual records cannot prove or document the mystery and miracle of God, the mystery and miracle of God with us. We turn instead to story and song and picture and poetry, and Luke's Christmas story gives us all of that, as beautifully and hauntingly as any story ever told. What better way to

express the reality of God's being with us and in us than with this story of a birth in the night to a poor couple finding shelter in a stable. In the most ordinary circumstances, God is born. In poverty and helplessness, the power of love shines anyway, in the songs of the angels, the amazement of the shepherds, and later on, the star bringing kings from far away. So much glory surrounds such a humble event – isn't that something we need to be reminded of – the presence and glory of God in the humble and ordinary?

Those who knew and followed Jesus when he grew up, saw him die, saw him risen, saw God in him, saw the love, the Word, the light – all those ways of thinking about God, in Jesus. And the story of Jesus' birth announces all of this – it's a story about what God is like, and it's a story about God really living in and with us. The Christmas story is a wonderful way of expressing how fully Jesus was God's love in the world, in human flesh, our flesh. It tells us a great deal about what God is like.

Which brings me to the other little girl. This one is drawing with her crayons in kindergarten. She's using all of her colors and drawing away with all her might, when her teacher asks her what she's drawing. "I am drawing a picture of God", she replied. Her teacher said, "But my dear, nobody knows what God looks like." The girl kept right on coloring, but said this: "They will when I'm finished."

The stories we tell, the pictures we create, the music we make, are all things we can do to show what God is like, and our Christmas story does this as well as any. But there is one more thing. Howard Thurman, the 20<sup>th</sup> century prophet-mystic and noted educator leads us to this last way of showing what God is like in his poem "Christmas Begins":

When the song of the angels is stilled  
When the star in the sky is gone  
When the kings and princes are home  
When the shepherds are back with their flocks  
The work of Christmas begins  
    To find the lost  
    To heal the broken  
    To feed the hungry  
    To release the prisoner  
    To rebuild the nations  
    To bring peace among people  
    To make music in the heart.

Loving one another, loving this whole world, is the very best thing we can do to show what God is like and what the Word made Flesh at Christmas really means. Amen.