

“A Christmas Eve Homily”

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There is only one Christmas story, and there are Christmas stories without number. I believe both are so as we gather once again on the Eve of the legendary birthday of the baby Jesus, celebrating as if he were being born for the very first time. With each passing year, the story grows more precious, seasoned with the simplicity of a reflective and expectant young mother and an attentive and expectant young father traveling far from home to do the mundane, to pay taxes under an army of occupation in an outpost of the Roman Empire. Not a convenient time, with a baby due momentarily; not a convenient time, travel being what it was then. What would we choose—bumper to bumper, long lines at Bradley, or a donkey?

Then there was the matter of reservations. It was clear to our expectant young parents that the baby would arrive soon, most likely at the lodging yet to be found on that starry night. Imagine, nine months pregnant and not a room to be found, with that gnarly innkeeper directing them to their last resort—a barn out back. Yesterday morning our youngsters acted out a different outcome as they brought to life a long ago pageant with a child cast in the role of innkeeper, a shy child with a bold conscience, a child/innkeeper who changed his mind: “Mary! Joseph! Come back! You can have my room!” But in the story told in Luke and Matthew, the anxious couple was directed to a barn out back. A space was prepared and an impromptu crib fashioned from a manger. Comfort was not the order of the night.

All the while, an angelic host was busy preparing a message—not for the media of the day, but for some raggedy band of shepherds far more focused on their sheep than the night sky. Legend tells us that the lead angel diverted their attention. After scaring the wits out of them, she sang a calming carol bidding them not to be afraid, but to make their way toward Bethlehem, the city of David, and to seek out a stable, where they would find the babe.

When I read as a child that the shepherds did indeed leave their sheep and journeyed without a second thought to Bethlehem and the stable, where they “found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger,” I wondered. How

could Mary and Joseph and their new baby squeeze themselves into one small manger?” Well, I figured it out after reviewing a few illustrations of how it might have happened. I didn’t learn about funny syntax for many years, let alone confusing translations. It was enough though that the angels sang, that the shepherds went, and that this beautiful little baby was born in a barn and laid in a space where the animal inhabitants were accustomed to finding their sustenance.

Of course the shepherds couldn’t hold onto this news, so Luke, author of what we know as the Gospel—the good news—According to Luke, tells us that the shepherds spread the word of this birth, the birth of a hoped for Savior, who would presumably save his people from all the ills that had befallen them. Here at long last was the Messiah.

What a beginning for a story that unfolded who-knows-exactly-how roughly two millennia ago. What a beginning for stories that unfolded millennia hence, just as unpredictably. When a child is born, anything can happen. As children grow, it is wise to continue to expect the unexpected.

Such was the case with the young children of a Unitarian minister in Boston not so many years ago. As the days grew cold and Christmas drew near, they were subject not to the oppression of the Roman Empire, but as inhabitants of a Beacon Hill parsonage, to their father’s Puritanical scrimping on the heating bill. Who knew that Carl Scovel’s uncommonly imaginative children would plan a kidnapping of sorts, with a ransom ensured to warm their small shivering bodies?

Word came to their father, the esteemed pastor of the esteemed King’s Chapel, that the baby Jesus, in the form of the beloved doll in the Christmas crèche, was missing. “What demented mind would run off with the baby Jesus?” he mused, unamused.

Carl was still learning about Christmas and children. With the ransom note found and the heat turned up came the epiphany brought home by his own uncommon children. Of course, of course, “No monarch, indeed no despot [myself even], can ever be so sure of his rule after a child has been born.”

On Christmas Eve, anything can happen, because so much has happened. Surely so much has happened to open our hearts and break our hearts with children more recently born and forever loved. We know that Christmas is not simply “Joy to the World” and “Deck the Halls” but the recalling for each of us the miracle of birth and the fragility of life.

In the words of Sophia Lyon Fahs:

“...each night a child is born is a holy night
 Fathers and mothers—sitting beside their children’s cribs
 Feel glory in the sigh of new life beginning
 They ask, ‘Where and how will this new life end?
 Or will it ever end?’”

Each night a child is born is a holy night.”

Legend, story, history in its manifest tellings—all happened and are happening still, unfolding like the detours of Mary and Joseph into a stable, catching us up short and restoring our attunement to the imaginative strategies of childhood, and breaking our hearts when we’ve fallen in love with our little ones and can hold not certainty, but hope that all will be well, all will be well.

Each of us has known some form of exile, some form of oppression, some form of loss and yearning, some form of hopelessness, some pangs of birth waiting to happen under circumstances beyond inconvenient. The contours and the detours of our journey across this rugged timescape may yet be in the making. We must not anticipate their resolution. Our call is to love, to hope.

It is Christmas Eve—a time of birth, a time of promise, a time of timelessness. May the star of Bethlehem find its way into our hearts. May the escapades of the children we know and the children we were bring a smile to our faces. May we bask in the candlelight of this Silent Night Holy Night and the company of one another. What fires our minds and stirs our hearts is the stuff of ordinary miracles. May it be so for each and all of you on this night of nights. Amen.

Sources

The Gospel According to Luke in the Bible (King James Version)

Carl Scovel, “The Stolen Infant,” in *Never Far from Home: Stories from the Radio Pulpit*, Skinner House, Boston, October 2003, 44-46.

Sophia Lyon Fahs, *For So the Children Come*, in *Singing the Living Tradition*, Beacon Press, Boston, Unitarian Universalist Association, 1993, 616.