

**The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd**

Austin, Texas

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 24, 2009

*Eve of the Incarnation, Luke 2:1-20*

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.  
No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin,  
where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in. *Amen.*

Good evening.

The Christmas season is an occasion of and for story: we hear and sing the Gospel story of Jesus' birth; we hear and sing of Mary's fidelity, the shepherds' courage, and the journey of the magi; and we hear and share our own stories: tales of family and friends told around the dinner table or by the fireplace, at the bedside and beneath the Christmas tree. All of these are stories – are moments – of Incarnation, occasions of God's Grace and presence.

I have made as my custom during these days of story the penning a tale, a story of quiet faith, perhaps an unexpected moment of Christmas, and telling of souls so meek, so divinely ordinary, that in and through them, *still*, the dear Christ enters in...

On that afternoon it was the black leather shoes that first caught his eye, and not her. Displayed as a pair, one shoe pointed down, and the other, on a pedestal set to its side and slightly taller than the first, pointed upward at the same angle, as though the shoes (presumably comfortably worn) were frozen, mid-stride, in the store window. Walking back to the courthouse after lunch he did not immediately stop, but after quickly checking his watch, he indulged in another look.

He was not a fastidious dresser by any measure, but he was a careful shopper when necessity pressed him to buy clothes. Mr. Leone had counseled him two months earlier that the shoes he was wearing could not accommodate another resoling, and the Parish Clerk was unlikely to accept a barefooted desk attendant. Running through these realities as he peered in the store window, a modest splurge on sharp new kicks did not seem unreasonable. In fact, it was practically practical. Yes. Practically practical.

When he would tell this story – and he had told it more times than he could either count or remember – he satisfied himself with the clever wordplay, not as a tool for storytelling, but because the phrase was exactly what he had thought to himself standing there on the Winnsboro, Louisiana, sidewalk in 1951. It was true, and no sooner had that thought crossed his mind did she catch his eye.

“She was flirting with a customer,” he would say, “a lawyer from Monroe who was at least ten years older than she was, when I saw her stand, walk to the register with a shoebox in her hand, and looking over her shoulder, give him a coquette’s wink and giggle.”

“I did no such thing,” she would protest, “There was no giggling.”

“Okay, so there was no giggling. But there was winking. I clearly saw winking.”

If they were telling the story together at a dinner party, she would now stand as if on cue, collect a few plates or glasses, and dusting crumbs into a napkin, say sweetly, “I was not winking...I was...selling shoes.” And with that she would wink before walking to the kitchen, leaving her flirty admission to linger with her company for a breath or two. And, oh, how he loved that moment, the mystery she would offer and leave on their table like a rich dessert.

Leaning in toward his company, “I’d have bought anything in the store,” he would say, “but Francie had mercy on me and just sold me the shoes in the window. It was a generosity I couldn’t ignore, and, for her kindness, two weeks later I asked her to marry me.”

He still could not believe that woman could have possibly grown old. But she did, and so had he, too.

They had lived what both would describe as a very good life together. They were never rich, but they were certainly never poor. He had run for Clerk of Court in the mid-Sixties, losing to the Mayor’s first cousin (who had twice failed out of LSU). He wound up an administrator in the Tax Assessor’s office for some thirty-odd years, working for men he trusted, good men. He had enjoyed his work, even if he was occasionally restless, and he was better at it than most. By the time he retired, only the Maintenance Supervisor had worked in the courthouse longer than had he, and on his last day in the office his colleagues gave him a Cross pen and pencil set that he thought was too much.

Now he sits in his recliner, watching a college football bowl game he’s never heard of, listening to his wife of fifty-eight years work in the kitchen. He eats Oreos from a stash of cookies he thinks she doesn’t know he hides under the sofa, and she polishes the silver, setting the table for Christmas Eve supper with her children and grandchildren. She wears an apron their youngest granddaughter decorated at Vacation Bible School some ten years before, which, between pink, hand-drawn bubbles reads, “Taste and See That the Lord Is Good.”

They had been married three years, living in a \$3,000, 912 square-foot home, when she delivered their first child, a girl they named Mae after his grandmother. Barely eleven months

later, was their second child, a son, born. Named James Edward but called Jimmy, he made his parents proud.

“I still don’t think you had to invite Gloria.”

“Good Lord, Ed. She’s your son’s mother-in-law. Of course we had to invite her.”

“She has other children to pester. Let her go eat with them.”

“Boise, Ed. Her *one* other child lives in Boise, Idaho. That sweet, eighty-nine-year-old woman wasn’t going to make it to Boise this year. Can we just have a normal family Christmas Eve for once without you complaining? Please?”

“I’m not complaining, I’m observing.”

She sighs loudly and shakes her head, and he continues thumbing through the Sunday paper. “Well, they’re giving away Bounty at Brookshire’s this week,” he announces as he shakes the advertisement.

Since his retirement, he has assumed responsibility for directing their grocery trips. While he only infrequently attends these outings, he always offers what he considers helpful counsel about the latest sales, and she does him the good courtesy of providing the receipt when she comes home. He remembers that they saved \$8.30 on the Christmas Eve supper groceries, which he considered an average savings, at best. He did not say it out loud, but he feared the reason for the shortage was listed as EXPAM SHEER SHAMP, in all capital letters on the receipt, which he believed to be an expensive shampoo. He also believed that grocers deliberately disguised on their receipts the identity of the goods they sold in order to protect themselves from careful shoppers like himself. Or, perhaps more accurately, having conspired

with wives like his, grocers protected themselves and their best customers from savvy husbands like himself.

When they were young parents, for Christmas Eve he cooked poor-boy steaks – hamburger patties wrapped in bacon – out on the grill. Sometime during Jimmy’s high school years, he splurged and bought baby filets for supper after Christmas Eve church, and his children went bananas: “But, baby, it’s a better piece of meat,” he tried to explain to the tempestuous Mae.

“I don’t want a better piece of meat – I want my Christmas Eve hamburger patty!” Their traditional fixins included little green peas, mashed potatoes with cheese on top, and a carrot cake. So it had been, and so, after that day, it would forever be.

Neither of their children regularly attended church as adults. Raising them, church had never been an option or a decision, but simply a way of life: people went to church; they were people; ergo, they went to church. This had never been confusing, and he was agitated when people would bring up the politics or particularities of their church-going experience, particularly when said issues were raised by his son: “Why can’t Jimmy just go to church without complaining?” he asks his wife.

“Because, unlike you, he doesn’t have grocery receipts to parse or food flyers to study, Honey.”

“Humph,” he retorts, continuing his study of the sales paper without looking up. “Well he’s going tonight, and he’s going to be polite about it.”

She pours her little green peas with mushrooms into a Pyrex and scrapes the last stray peas into the dish with a spoon. She tucks the peas next to the potatoes to stay warm in the oven, washes the spoon and then her hands, and when she turns, her aging husband, the one with whom she has shared her life, is leaning on the kitchen counter.

“You’re a mess, Ed,” she says, drying her hands on her apron.

“Yeah, but I love you. I’d have bought the whole store if I thought you’d have winked at me.”

She leans into his soft side, and he puts an arm around her shoulder when the doorbell rings. He leans back from her embrace to see through the window who it is.

“Your son and his family are standing on the front porch. Let’s go make a merry Christmas.” His bride pats him on his belly, and he kisses the top of her head before she heads toward the door. He smiles.

People of God, the most vital – the most important – theological text any of us will ever engage is our own story. We may have exchanged the lathe for the laptop, shepherds’ fields for well sites; but believe: the Carpenter’s Son is still plying his trade, and the angel of the Lord still looks to shine the glory of God all around us. We must come to recognize in our own story a tale full of characters modest and grand; of times fat and lean; of hopes fulfilled, emptied, and filled again: *When did you first see her? What, star, brightly shining, have you followed?*

We must discover our moments of despair and our occasions of Grace: *When was it that this world laid you low, and what angels spoke glad tidings to you? To whom have you given your gifts and giftedness, and who has shared theirs, with you?*

We as the Body of God must unbind, uncover, and unmask the face of Christ, drawn into our countenance at the beginning of the world, for God loves that child he made, loves her like the babe born in a manger, like the mother who bore him, like the father who knelt and held her hand. The story of Christmas is your story, our story, the one we tell, not so that there is a great distance between us and an impassable, unreachable past when God was acting in the world, but so that we would find the Infant King at work in that intimate, ordinary world where we live and move and have our being: between the mushrooms and the peas; the grocery flyer and the hidden box of Oreos; on the sidewalk in front of the shoe store that long ago went out of business.

Indeed: O Come, o come, all ye faithful, and let us adore him, Christ the Lord.