

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

Austin, Texas

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 24, 2011

Eve of the Incarnation, Luke 2:1-20

*He came down to earth from heaven, who is God and Lord of all,
and his shelter was a stable, and his cradle was a stall;
[and] with the poor, the scorned, the lowly,
lived on earth our Savior, holy. Amen.*

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: Eucharistic 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 can be occasions of *Immanuel* – God with us – Gospel stories.

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



From his seat in the nook of his family's dining room window, he sees his father's headlights turn into their winding driveway. As the long car lumbers over the curb, its headlights, bright as a camera's flash, make his wide eyes sparkle above his grin. His father pulls into the center garage bay, turns off the car, and when the headlights finally dim, the cabin lamp comes quickly to life. In the lit cabin he can see his father thumb the steering wheel grain, his father's head unmoving. Before the garage door hits the smooth cement floor, he dashes around the kitchen corner and stands on his tip-toes inside the backdoor.

A tall man, fit and closely shaven, his father lifts a gym bag and briefcase from the back seat, shuts the driver's door, presses a button on his key fob, and the car's red tail lamps blink twice while its horn chirps ascent. He opens the backdoor before his father can even reach for the doorknob. "Hey, partner," his father says, his voice almost a straight line.

"I'll take your bags!" he says hopefully.

"Sure thing. Thank you."

He runs to his parent's bedroom and hangs the bags on his father's coatrack. Hearing his mother's voice, he slows at the top of the stairs. Dropping to his knees and pressing his cheek to the wood floor, he can see a sliver into the kitchen below. He sees his mother in her Christmas apron, drying a pot and leaning against the counter.

"Well," his mother says.

"Well what?" his father replies.

"Well where have you been?"

"I've been at work. Work. I took a call at 5:05, and the client kept me on the line forever. What did you want me to do?"

"Come home would have been nice."

His father slams the refrigerator shut, and he can hear the jars still rattling in its door. “Whatever,” his father says. “I’m not having this conversation.”

His mother leaves his field of vision, and he picks himself off of the floor. He pauses, still not sure whether he wants his parents to *know* that he’s coming so that they will be nice to each other, pretending even if they don’t want to be; or whether he wants to be quiet as a mouse, so they *won’t* know he’s coming, and he might catch them being honest. He decides he will roll a basketball down the stairs instead, an advance scout on an uncertain mission.

He had set the ball, a birthday present from his grandmother, in the laundry basket at the top of the stairs, hoping that it might catch his father’s eye and his father might suggest that the two of them go outside and play H.O.R.S.E. His father taught him how to play H.O.R.S.E. in their driveway early that fall on the day his mother worked in the garden in her bright yellow gloves that nearly reach her elbows. Now, as he pushes the ball down the stairs, he can’t believe that was so long ago – before school, even – and he can’t believe how much momentum the ball immediately begins to gain: *thud*, the ball sounds as it hits the top step; *thoomp*, the ball sounds as it skips to the turn in the stairwell, building speed and gaining height; *boom*, the ball sounds as it leaps high now, almost to the ceiling; until, finally, *crash*, the vase with the Chinese letters sounds as it explodes into a million pieces on the floor.

His mother and father burst into the foyer, the basketball still rocking back-and-forth in a pile of brightly colored ceramic.

“Oh, my God!” his mother says. His parents look up the stairs at him, standing there with his hands on his head, and his mouth wide open.

“How could you?,” his mother screeches. “Do you see what you have done?”

“Son, what were you thinking?” his father asks.

“I, I don’t know,” he replies.

“Go to your room. This is unbelievable. Of all the things to break: your mother’s roommate gave us that vase as a wedding gift.”

“Yes, sir,” he says, hanging his head, not sure if the words actually came out or if the swell of tears beat them to his lips.

He lays on his bed and covers his head with his giant, stuffed triceratops. “It’s over,” he thinks to himself, and he closes his eyes.

After having picked up many promising-looking sticks, he still had never found a functioning wand, and he had about decided that Harry Potter’s magic did not exist in his thoroughly *muggle* world. And after trying on all of his mother’s rings, holding them up and inspecting each one of them carefully in the light, and still not finding anything like The One Ring, he had about decided that Frodo and the Shire were just too far away from his plain town to do him any good. And don’t even get him started about how many times he had hung upside-down from his bunkbed – Luke Skywalker frozen into the Wampa’s icy cave – and failing to draw his lightsaber into his hand, had just about decided that The Force somehow did not function within the continental United States.

But Christmas...Christmas was magic he could actually depend on.

At Christmas, Santa never failed to deliver, and his room was a trophy case of Mr. Claus’ successes: back when he was really little, it was Thomas the Tank Engine he had to have, and it

was nothing less than the Island of Sodor that Santa had delivered; in Kindergarten, it was a Hot Wheels Rock-n-Oil Car Wash; First Grade, Legos; Second Grade: more Legos; Third Grade: Harry Potter; and this year? While he was leaning toward Star Wars, he wasn't afraid of asking for more Legos, either. In his letter to Santa he decided he didn't want to seem greedy: "Dear Santa, As you know, I like Star Wars *and* Legos. I don't want to be greedy, so whichever one you think is best for me, I would like to have. But both would be awesome, too."

Flying sleighs and craftsman elves were powerful magic, indeed, but, even more, he looked forward to sometime after Thanksgiving, when his mother would begin absently humming "Joy to the World," and in the afternoons, she would, with green icing, trace Christmas trees on wax paper that he, sitting at the breakfast table, could decorate with sprinkles and lifesavers, and then sloppily, messily lick clean. And, after buying their real-live Christmas tree and standing it up in their den, his father would sit with him on the tree skirt and, untangling strings of lights, whisper in his ear his first silly ideas for his mother's Christmas presents.

"Do you think she would like a booger taco for Christmas?"

"NO!" He would laugh and say, his father now tickling him under the ribs.

"Okay, okay you're right. What about New Zealand? I've looked into it, and if we sell your grandmother's cat at auction, I think we can afford the down payment."

This was the magic that mattered most, and as he falls asleep, he worries that today, on this, the eve of Christmas Eve, he had finally broken its powerful spell.

He wakes. The digital clock flashes 11:48 P.M. He realizes that he is under the covers and his triceratops has been snuggled in its usual spot at the foot of his bed. He lifts the sheets and discovers that he is wearing pajamas, and not just any pajamas, but his *favorite* pajamas, the ones with the little Yodas.

Pulling back his covers he sits on the edge of his bed and sees a sandwich, cut into triangles, sealed in a Ziploc bag, and propped carefully on his bedside table. He picks up the heavy baggie and reads the thick, black, Sharpie print: "I'm sorry you missed your supper." Picking up his late dinner and tip-toing into the dark hallway outside of his room, he begins to carefully walk down the stairs...until he stops...frozen. What is that light? Was that a jingling bell? Who is that laughing? Could it be...but it's not even Christmas Eve! In a breath, he wonders whether he could have slept through a whole day, but decides that it is impossible: no way his parents would have let him get out of going to church. But, then, who is downstairs?

Crouching...he looks through the bannister...and sees two red and green figures leaning against the sofa and sitting on the den floor. Both in their pajamas, a Santa's hat sits crookedly on his mother's head. Scraps of wrapping paper and neatly packaged gifts surround her like the rings of Saturn, and his father sips something warm from a Christmas mug. On television, even he recognizes Cousin Eddie, who sips his own eggnog and knocks over a Christmas decoration in Clark's living room. His mother leans back into his father, giggling, and his father kisses the back of her head. She sits up and scratches her nose with a pair of scissors.

He sits on the stairs and begins to unwrap his sandwich.

"Well, how long have *you* been sitting over there?" his father asks.

His heart drops. "Not long. I'm sorry. I'll go back to bed."

“Oh, don’t be sorry,” his mother reassures, as she stands and stretches. “And you can bring your sandwich over here. Do you want some hot chocolate?”

He nods and runs to his father’s lap. “I’m sorry I broke the vase.”

“Well, it happens. Be more careful next time. You got it?”

“I got it.” And as the Griswolds sit at a Christmas table somewhere inside the television, his mother sets his hot chocolate on the floor beside him and nestles herself next to her two boys.

“It’s hot underneath those marshmallows,” his mother warns.

“Yes ma’am.”



People of God, the most vital – the most important – theological text any of us will ever encounter is our own story. We may have exchanged the lathe for the laptop, and shepherds’ fields for office parks; but believe...*believe*: the angel of the Lord still looks to shine brightly the glory of God.

Longing for the infinity to which we know we belong, we gather tonight to seek a child. Infant King, forever and yet for only a moment, he will heal the sick. He will forgive the sinful. He will bind the brokenhearted. He will welcome strangers. And though he will suffer, so, too, in the mystery of heaven, he will be raised.

For us, faith in this Holy One is not parlor trickery that will make the ordinary, or the difficult, or the awful, vanish with the wave of a wand or the wiggle of a nose. Indeed, encounter with this child, Jesus, makes no promise that we will be exempt from suffering or even from death. Born into this world, he knows our human experience, and promises his presence with us: always and unfailing. Therefore, we can come to this Christmas table *as we are*: with wonder *and* with worry; with faith *and* with frustration; and with *everything* else in between...for no matter from what or whom or where we come; no matter if we bring the pieces of this season scattered, broken, or neatly assembled: something ancient and good inside of us *knows* that faith in this Littlest One promises meaning for our life. For *this is the night*: not of empty sentimentalism, but nothing less than Incarnation.

The story of Christmas is *our* story – *your* story – the one we tell over and over and over again, because the world distracts us and we forget who we are. So tonight, we 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, loves *you* like the mother who bore him, like the father who knelt and held her hand...and we must seek the same, in *our* family, in this family, and in the whole family of God, cradled by this Holy One who loves us above and beyond all else.

Amen.