

Telling the Good News Story Again

A Message shared with the congregation of St. Andrew's United Church

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by Rev. Dave Le Grand

How many times have you heard this story? Can you remember waaaay back to the first time you heard it? I can't remember my very first Christmas Eve worship, but I remember the feeling, magic.

As a child, I had the experience of being held by something. The familiar songs sung with zeal. It was a sense that I was safe there, for those moments. Whatever was going on in the world, I heard the story of Jesus being born to Mary in a feeding trough in Bethlehem. Even then I knew, theologically, that God did not follow conventional wisdom – that is, what my parents told me. God broke rules, broke barriers for us. I also have the distinct sense that, after the sugar high of Christmas Day, the real-world problems set in: school, tragedies in the world, uncertainties of life, and death.

I want to go back to that feeling of safety. I don't know about you, but I get a glimmer of Christmas Eve wonder, but I also find myself digging a bit deeper than feelings and emotions. This story, a young peasant girl, Mary, who was not at all passively willing to carry this Christ child and pushes the angel Gabriel to persuade her. In childhood, there was an almost fairy tale quality to the Story. But as I get older, I question the story, and I think that my faith is deepened.

Let me explain. You see, there is power in the ritual, the tradition of telling the Christmas Story every year at this time. The tradition is important, like healthy daily routines are important. But really ponder this story, as Mary held close in her heart the news from the angel that she would have God's beloved. I think that we all know that the Holy Land is not filled with peace. It betrays the utter humanity of the people who live there, just like the people who live everywhere else, you and me, too. We enjoy peace, but then something happens: a violent assault in our city, or a worrisome diagnosis that comes out of seemingly nowhere.

We cannot stay in a bubble. Nor did Mary. We know almost nothing about Mary's and Joseph's child-rearing skills. We know that Jesus was rather obstinate as a teenager when it came to his religious practice. Off he would go without telling mom and dad. They would find him, debating with seasoned religious leaders, and he deflects any responsibility when the parents try to discipline him.

There must have been many, many moments of utter humanity in those years when Jesus was growing up. It is a bit of a reality check when I try to make the Christmas Story like those romantic movies, you know, dreamy. Well, there is always a complication, but it ends happily.

This Christmas Story of our tradition, told over and over again, reminds us that God does not play it safe; God wants connection with us. Our Creator desires wholeness, shalom, in the world. Unfortunately, the John Williams minor key refrain kicks in: Dum, dum dum dum, dum dum dum, dum dum dum. The reality check: no safe place for Mary to give birth. The backdrop of the entire story, established early in the first chapter of Luke: "During the rule of King Herod of Judea..."

As we hear this story year after year, as we grow older, well, let's say we mature and get better, smarter, our faith is challenged and deepened. Not just relationship between God and me – I am the centre of God's vision, as some prosperity Gospel preachers try to convince us. God loves all of humanity, all of Creation. I'm imagining that the Inn Keeper might have popped in, hearing all the activity among the animals outside. God roused the shepherds from their night watch under the stars. Don't assume that the shepherds were all men. When I hiked in the Judean hills, I met more than a few women, and rather modern women, among the men, some of them studying at Bethlehem university while carrying on the family business of shepherding.

God gathers practitioners from an altogether different faith tradition, scholars who somehow feel compelled to make a long journey following a star to the newborn child-king as prophesied in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures. I like that the animals are there too. The Story tells me, an older, perhaps a bit more cynical me, that God wanted Creation, the animals, to have co-star status in this Story. But Herod, that self-absorbed, entitled political leader, was not invited. He stays in the backdrop, as, figuratively speaking, Herod still factors in our world, our culture today. The evils of greed and the desire for power and accumulation form the backdrop of the world that we live in, that we will re-enter after the peace, the safe family gatherings, and perhaps eating a little too many treats.

But telling this story again, tonight, I hope that you and I will go a little deeper in our faith, to ponder what this story means for us. A God born as a defenseless infant, to a peasant family. Very ordinary people and creatures witness this marvel of a holy birth among animals, and God's beloved, laid lovingly in the feeding trough.