

Christmas Eve Reflection 2017

It's Christmas Eve... and we've heard again the Christmas story... this ancient story that we tell every year. We are people of stories. Our lives are told in stories. Here is my favorite Christmas story: I served two little churches in rural northern California as a first-time solo pastor. The week before Christmas Ralph and I hosted the Men's Fellowship Breakfast at the parsonage and we invited the two churches to an Open House at the parsonage too. I took the youth group Christmas caroling, and I directed the Christmas pageant. I typed and copied the Christmas Eve programs. That evening on Christmas Eve, Ralph was driving us to Ft. Jones for the first hour of worship, and I looked over the program that I'd typed. I saw that I was supposed to give a Christmas reflection... and I thought "O holy... night! I haven't prepared anything to say... who put this in the program?" I remember writing some notes on the back of an envelope I found in the glove-box and that was my Christmas reflection.

This is my favorite Christmas story because this night, this holy night, speaks for itself. It doesn't need commentary. The candlelight and the music, the darkness and the cold, the mystery of this night, is in the air we breathe. You'd have to be asleep to not sense the beauty and the wonder. All these things remind us, and testify to us, of this ancient story of God's love for us, birthed into the world in a baby named Jesus.

This is our story. Those of us who gather as the Church, and who follow Jesus Christ, carry the Christmas story within us. We are the living story of God's love. We tell it to each other, we tell it to our children, and we hear it tonight with the awe of the first time: that God, out of love for us, became one of us. For the simple reason that we need to be shown and reminded how to love.

If you're following the news you know there's war and hatred and division, and brokenness and intolerance, everywhere, in every corner of the globe. We human beings aren't able to love each other. God however is love, and created us, the bible tells us, out of love and out of a longing to be in relationship with us. The bible tells us that we were created in God's image, so there is within each of us an innate need to love and to be in relationship. We were created in God's image but we aren't God... and we aren't good at loving or forgiving or giving second chances to each other or even to ourselves.

The ancient prophets told God's story to the people... that they were created by God to love and be in relationship with God and with each other. And the people listened to God's story with half an ear, and although different prophets told God's story throughout generations the people still only listened with half an ear. God's story (maybe like the Christmas story we've heard tonight) sounded good to the people but impossible to really take to heart. So God - out of love, or perhaps out of desperation - decided to enter the human story in "the flesh" and used an angel named Gabriel and a young woman named Mary and a young man named Joseph to "give flesh" to God's story. And God became one of us, coming into the world as a human baby. He was called Jesus, Emmanuel, which means God-with-us. He told stories about love and compassion and forgiveness and second chances.

Jesus changed the human story that we have told ourselves: that we are destructive and damaged, who in spite of our good intentions are drawn to war and hatred. Jesus instead showed us God's story of who we are: loving, compassionate, and forgiving people, who serve those in need. Jesus changed the human story. We still

listen with half an ear, and few of us take the story of God's redeeming love for us and for all the human family, to heart. But the story has forever changed the world, and we are still telling it... to each other and to ourselves: that God created us to love and to be loved, and that only love can heal us and change the story we've been told about ourselves.

We gather as the church to tell God's story, and to remember that we are now a part of God's story of love, and mercy and compassion, of forgiveness and second chances. We carry the Christmas story within us. St. Teresa of Avila, a Spanish mystic in the 1500s, famously wrote: "Christ Jesus has no body now but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which He looks compassion on this world. Yours are the feet with which He walks to do good. Yours are the hands through which He blesses all the world. Yours are the hands, yours are the feet, yours are the eyes, you are His body. Christ has no body now on earth but yours."

The only way the Christmas story is a living story - this story of God's life-changing love - is for you to carry it within you. Jesus was birthed into the world, into the human story, eons ago. And He's still alive because those of us who follow Him carry Him in our hearts. And we gather as His people to practice loving and forgiving and giving second chances and serving those in need. That's the Christmas story: the story of love.

I don't know your story but we all seem to be pretty much the same. We all struggle to love ourselves and to love each other. If loving were easy God wouldn't have entered into our story the way God did. We wouldn't need Jesus as a friend and a Savior. Tonight, on this mysterious and sacred and beautiful night... tonight I invite you

to close your eyes and breathe in the love... and to invite Jesus, the embodiment of God's love for you and for all the world... invite Jesus into your story... invite Jesus to change your story. [PAUSE] When the Garvens and DeBromKrop families lit the Advent candles they read that Jesus was God's love-child. You are also God's child, and Jesus was born for you to experience God's love story.

You might be angry with me tomorrow - or maybe not until Tuesday morning - when you go back to work and loving your coworker (seeing them through the eyes of Jesus' love) feel impossible OR a there's someone in your family or your neighborhood that you can't stand OR you're sick of yourself... you might be angry with me that tonight I made love sound so plausible. We human beings are pretty easily seduced by a love story. But love is hard work. That's why we follow Jesus, because He shows us how it's done. He is with us, this God-in-the-flesh called Emmanuel, and His love changes us, and heals us, and He changes our human story... your story, my story, and we become part of this ancient and ageless love story. This my Christmas wish for you, for all of us, that we take the Christmas story to heart, and that it becomes our story, our love story. Amen.