

The Feast of the Nativity - Christmas Day - 25 December 2011

Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

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People have waited, watched for it. Christmas is here at last, and people of faith in God are gathering this day, just as we are, to celebrate its arrival. Along with us, people of hope, that sister of faith, are turning also to this day. They are all turning to this story of that baby born in Bethlehem; to that story laid down in history that yet refuses to be defined as such.

“One must have the heart of a child and the soul of a poet if [one] would read the story of Jesus....” So declared the Rev. John Fort Newton, whose ministry in the early decades of the 20th century took him from a ministry as Southern Baptist pastor to ministry as an Episcopal priest. Newton’s comments go on to describe Jesus’ story: “[It is] the Biography of Pity, the Memoirs of Love, the Sovereign Beauty of this world.” “It is,” writes Newton, “the poet who knows,... telling in rhythmic numbers, in tales and golden histories, of the birth of God in [humankind] assuring [humanity] of [our] destiny in God.”

You and I hear it today in the plain language of the gospel. And isn’t it true that even in its simplicity, the narrative nearly sings? Some will lament that the story we recall has, over time, become nearly lost in sentimental prose and lilting poetry, and the scenes depicted there romanticized in painting and picture that carefully cast soft light and place halos on the heads of a beatific family resting in a happy stable.

But I won’t invite you to join yourself to this complaint. I have no regrets about the annual softening of hearts that Christmas brings. Instead, I give God thanks that something about us, something deeply human about us, resonates with the story of the birth of a helpless infant, the story of a mother and earthly father struggling to find shelter, of shepherds caught by surprise; and the story of all of it all taking place in the midst of a world around them that is too

busy to notice. I give God thanks, and I hope you do also, that there is something about our human nature that responds to the efforts of artists, poets, and musicians to capture and convey the meaning that lies within the simple narrative.

And God forbid anyone try too hard to analyze it and thus render it unable to move us and guide us anymore. So, not an analysis, but only an observation: that whatever it is that is good about you and me and about anyone around us is that which hears the lyrical truth in Jesus’ story. Whatever is best about humanity is that same quality that feels at Christmastime the warm embrace of Divine Love made real and brought near in the story of the birth of Jesus.

Here is Mary, holding her secret close to her heart. She knows by faith and by hope that this child with whom she is entrusted will be the object of the hope and faith of those many generations who have come before her, and of those untold generations who will follow. Is this the Mary of countless artistic renderings; the Mary of an almost stoic joy, the Mary so filled with awe and wonder that she apparently is oblivious to the pains of childbirth? Or is this the plain and simple Mary of a story plainly and simple told, a story that assumes that we who hear it and read it will surely understand the fears, the struggles, the gritty untidy ordeal that she will endure to bring this child into our world?

Here is Joseph, trying to do what is expected of him. Is this the Joseph of song and fresco, masculinely following orders, regardless of the hardship involved; selflessly leading his beloved to his ancestral home, calmly abiding by his commitment to his fiancée, bravely preparing to be a father? Or is this the real man implied but little referred to in the story, quietly afraid for his beloved, for the life of his unborn

child, and simply afraid of his own uncertain responsibilities with raising a child that will belong less to him, than to God and to the world?

Here are the shepherds, startled to a wakefulness greater perhaps than at any time in their lives before; frightened and ecstatic all at the same time. Are they the shepherds of storybook illustration, of cartoon characterization like Linus in a *Charlie Brown Christmas*, people with wisdom beyond their years and clothing, posture, and manner beyond their station? Or are they real people who really live on the margins of acceptable society, who are steeped in the sounds and odors of their earthy occupation, real people who know that, at best, the rest of society will tolerate their company temporarily, but generally insists that they remain out in the pastures, out of sight, and doing the necessary labor that no one else will do?

Here is the story. And here today is its celebration in song and psalm and splendor. Are the two distinct? Are two stories here from which we must choose to know the wonderful truth that comes to us in the birth of Jesus? Is the truth of the story so subtle and specific that you and I and everyone gathering today to hear it again will do best to set aside the sentiment and study the principles that the story sets forth? Is the joy of the celebration so rich and full that the plain realities of the story are better forgotten?

Or is necessary that we have to choose at all? Is there not one story enfolding both a simple narration, on the one hand, and, on the other, the lofty inspirations of its expression in color and form, in lyric and melody, in rhyme and rhythm? Is there not one beautiful and glorious story, clear and striking in simplicity, fantastic and challenging in intricacy? Is there not one great story that tells both God's story and our own?

"On the story will go," the Rev. Newton continues, "setting truth to music; and [people] will

read it in the warm and misty light of tears and know the truth as it is in Jesus." Today, tomorrow, Christmas invites us to find our stories in the lusty praise we offer and in the quiet hymn we sing; in the prayers we lift to God even as they lift our own hearts higher, in the warmth of handshake and embrace, in the glow of a lighted tree. And afterward, Christ invites us to find our stories also in the same sweet sentiments that work within us, perhaps more quietly and simply, that express themselves more plainly, the rest of the year, and that that continue to bring near the Love of God for all.

If it is true that "One must have the heart of a child and the soul of a poet" to read the story of Jesus, then Christmas invites us all to give God thanks for this. And thanks be to God for that within us that has caused us to watch and wait and wonder, for that which is born again this day within each heart and soul.

Today, tomorrow, and then in the days and weeks and months that follow, seek and find that truth that *is* Jesus, and let it find expression in the song and mural that is your life, in that complex sonnet and that simple prose that tell the story of Jesus in your life, my life, in the lives of those around us, and finally and fully, in our life together.

Thanks be to God for that which draws us again to the shepherds, the Josephs, the Marys, within us and around us, to their stories and our own in that story once begun but not yet ended in that baby born in Bethlehem.

And so may God, who wonderfully created us, and more wonderfully restores the dignity of human nature, grant that we may share the divine life of the One who humbly shares in our humanity, Jesus the Christ, who lives and reigns with the Heavenly Father and the Holy Spirit, One God, for ever and ever. Amen.