

Christmas - it's a mystery!

A sermon preached at Faith on Christmas Eve, 2009.

It wasn't a Christmas movie, but the Best Picture from 1999, Shakespeare in Love, got me through last week. In it, Geoffrey Rush played the theater owner who was attempting to put on a new play from Will Shakespeare, which turned out to be a little known piece called Romeo and Juliet. In the story, Rush's character seemed to always be just one step away from disaster and when anyone asked him how something in the theater was going to possibly work out – he would always reply, “I don't know – it's a mystery!” And what made Rush's character so compelling was that he seemed to revel in the unknown, the possibility of being surprised by the end result that he could not possibly have foreseen.

I found myself embracing this statement of faith as the planning of our Christmas week loomed. So many of our families had taken advantage of the full week off of school and gone away that we knew we were going to be a little thin casting the Christmas pageant; our annual women's brunch had only half of the number of women signed up to come and those who had were dropping like flies due to flu, unexpected travel and assorted circumstances. Our flower guild was stressed by the loss of some ready hands at this busy time of year, the choir was struggling with the syncopated rhythms of one of the pieces for tonight and then last Friday night at the pageant rehearsal, our director called in sick. Disaster was gaining on me. Then the full impact hit when we realized that the oldest girl available for the pageant was 3 years old. She would be our Mary but every time I referred to her as Mary, she emphatically told me that her name was Raine, not Mary. The oldest cast member was six. When I finally got home, exhausted and wondering how we were going to pull this off, Geoffrey Rush popped into my head – “it's a mystery!” In that moment, I decided that I was going to completely trust in the mysterious ways of Christmas and I've not been disappointed.

The Women's Brunch was delightful – great food, the cut-throat gift exchange was its most riotous and fun. The choir is in fine form, the flowers are beautiful and the pageant was one for the ages. We began with the revolt of the angels – the boys who thought that “angel” sounded cool changed their minds when they discovered that the costumes were decidedly girly. So a quick change into shepherd garb. In the spirit of the mystery one of our girls showed up and was slapped into Angel of the Lord costume. Her sidekick angel was only two and pretty much frozen in place because she was stepping on the front hem of her dress and unable to move. Max the Churchdog made his triumphant reprise as the flock of sheep and every other bit of livestock. Mr. Vicar had to stand as Goliath to be slain by David. The shepherds were right to be afraid as the stand-in Angel of the Lord was clearly not happy; she stood there with her arms crossed and a scowl on her face refusing to share good news. And then Joseph showed up in Bethlehem alone. When I said, “Hey Cooper, you forgot Mary.” We heard from the back of the church, “She doesn't want to come!” Our Mary finally arrived, not on a donkey, but in her mother's arms. At any rate, it all worked out, mysteriously but it has let us all proclaim with assurance that here at Faith, Christ was born to Raine!

2009 has been a really tough year by anyone's standards. People have been unemployed for way too long, too many have lost their homes and some have lost hope. If there were ever a time for

glad tidings and great joy, it would be now. However, we look around and see that it is still a mean world but Christmas says that meanness does not triumph. In Los Angeles Mirna Gonzalez had saved her change all year to be able to have some money for Christmas for her sons. She took the jar and went to the change machine – it totaled \$620. But before she could even put the money in her purse – she was robbed. She turned to an organization called MEND – Meeting Every Need with Dignity. She saw just that. People who were worse off than she was, all struggling with needing to ask for help. The staff was so kind to everyone that Mirna was determined to help them. So she made lunch; enchiladas, taquitos, beans, and a flan enough for 25 people and took it by. The staff was moved to tears. An LA Times reporter heard about the story and wrote it on her blog. The community's response became the page two column on Tuesday. Her generosity triggered the generosity of others and we all had our hearts lifted a bit. How did it all come together? It's a mystery.

But there is more mystery in this night than people moved to generosity. It is the mystery of the incarnation – that intersection of the human and the divine in the infant we celebrate tonight, that living idea of God. We don't need to know exactly how those two different things fit into one, all we need to know is that love now has a face. And in the way of good mysteries, that face is revealed in each and every face. I don't understand the incarnation to mean that God was not in the world before Jesus. But this little light of the world has helped us to see it. Because of Christmas, the divine in the world, in you and in me has been drawn out of the shadows cast by meanness and indifference. It is no wonder that so many of Jesus' healing miracles involved restoring sight to the blind. Through him we can all see the each other clearly and recognize ourselves as family.

We have been invited into this Christ way of living for 2000 years. I don't know if God thought we were going to catch on quickly or not. The meanness of the world has not yet been overcome and it is here that I need the voice of Geoffrey Rush the most because quite honestly, I don't see how it's going to work out. I don't know that is going to stop us from hurting each other. I don't know what is going to make the suffering of others unacceptable to us. I have no idea how we are ever going to learn self-sacrifice. But it doesn't matter if I don't know because God does. Christmas tells me that God is not content to let us stumble around in the dark, snarling when we bump into each other. I don't have to know how we are all going to figure it out one day. It's a mystery and I'm fine with that.