



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

The Eternal Story

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

Christmas Eve, 2014

If I never have to sit through another presentation of Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol*, be it a well done version with Patrick Stewart or even the hilarious Muppets, or some wretched Christmas episode of a television series, I'll be glad. For some reason, it has really run its course with me. I find nothing to amaze me or intrigue me any more in the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, Jacob Marley and the trio of ghosts leave me unimpressed. I've gotten all I'm ever going to get out of that story.

The same is true with the Nutcracker. In the absence of someone I know or their children dancing in a local production of this Christmas perennial, I have lost the motivation to seek out the Clara, the Sugar Plum Fairy and the Nutcracker come to life to battle the Rodent King. Even feats of balletic virtuosity seem commonplace to me when wrapped in this story. I've seen it all before.

So why is it that I never get tired of this simple story of the birth of a child so long ago? I have visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem and even though I was unmoved by décor and its presentation and insistence that the silver star on the floor is X marks the spot it didn't matter – the mystery of this story managed to creep through the tourism and effect me most profoundly.

I have stood in what is known as Shepherd's Field outside of Bethlehem. It is still a barren hillside with the town on the next hill as its backdrop. As I looked down at the ground by my feet I saw a brass shell casing – a remnant and reminder of that as yet unrealized promise of peace and even though I don't necessarily need to believe that on a particular evening like this the sky was filled with angels singing – in that moment they were very real. My 21st century mind could not keep the possibility of them in its proper rational place. They were real indeed. Their joyous proclamation and counsel to not be afraid seemed tinged with something akin to heavenly impatience – wondering when we were going to all decide to go and see the child and let him be born in us.

It is that particular ability of this story to become real that gives it its eternal freshness. No matter how commercialized it becomes, even glowing plastic nativity scenes have a hint – a slight one – of the mystery. No matter what we do to the story, we cannot rob it of its power. The worst thing that we can do to it is to assume that it is something that happened once a long time ago in another place. When we do that we forget that we are Bethlehem, we are the stable.

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But this story is more powerful than we are – it is more powerful than our ability to ignore or misconstrue it. It will find a way to enter our hearts. Like the *Hound of Heaven* in Francis Thompson’s famous poem the truth of this night, this birth will pursue you “down the nights and down the days...down the arches of the years, and down the labyrinthine ways of your own mind” and eventually bring you grateful acceptance of this peace child as your own.

One of the great contemporary writers on the state of religion in the US is Phyllis Tickle. She's written for many years now of what in the world is going on in Christianity. This is a paragraph from her book *Prayer Is A Place* that gets to the power of this story and why we can believe in its truth. She writes of a talk she gave in Atlanta and said...

“During the course of my address, I must have mentioned the doctrine of the Virgin Birth as an area of current theological and doctrinal contest. After the lecture was over and the general questions finished, a young man – probably no more than eighteen – came up to me, shaking his head. “I just don’t get it,” he said. “Of course I believe in the Virgin Birth. Why wouldn’t I? The whole thing’s so beautiful, it has to be true, whether it happened or not.”

That’s why I don’t get tired of this Christmas story – it is simply too beautiful not to be true. The beauty and truth of the Nativity story are not things that can be proved as actual physical and temporal events. Their truth evades that kind of thinking. The truth of the birth of the Christ child transcends literalism. I believe that it can still be understood as true even if one discounts the details of the story. Truth with a capital T is like that. It does not require evidence that will stand up as testimony in court. Its truth resonates in your heart and it all becomes real.

What become real for us are simple moments of divinity in the smell of hay in a stable. It has a very sweet fragrance, especially when it is newly cut. When it mingles with the others scents, wood and the warm breath of the cattle it is precious beyond gold. What’s real is the calm, matter of fact acceptance that babies will be born where babies will be born and the magical welcome offered by that place that night. What’s real is Mary blissful exhaustion when she holds her son in her arms for the first time. It is the baby’s amazement at sudden liberation – arms and legs move freely, no longer confined. What’s real is Joseph’s arms around them both, giving them strength and warmth.

The most real thing in this story is God’s love and desire that made it happen in the first place. In all of the history of how people have understood the holy, never has there been such a bold move. No self-respecting deity would forego majesty and magnificence for a manger. No God, cloaked in awe and enthroned in regal distance would ever deign to enter into the everyday lives of a people so clearly unworthy of such a presence. Never has there been such a shocking emptying of power and an invitation to be known in weakness and vulnerability. Here in the form of an infant, God allows us the honor to cradle divinity. That is quite simply too beautiful not to be true.

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