

Back to Bethlehem

Luke 1:26-38

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The angel Gabriel has arrived. Jesus will come. It's time to get back to Bethlehem. Our last minute Christmas preparations are underway. The tree is up. The Advent calendar is almost complete. It's time to settle down next to the manger and wait for the birth of the Christ child with awe and wonder.

The season of Advent began with a bang. We read about the second coming of Christ on the first Sunday of Advent: "In those days...the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven" (Mk 13:24-25). From that grand cosmic disturbance, Advent made its way through the blaring sermon of John the Baptist, and the beautiful song of Mary, to the quiet intimate manger scene where a little child is born. In Advent, we make our way with awe and wonder back to Bethlehem.

This Advent progression from cosmic disturbance to quiet manger may reflect something of what happens inside adults this time of year. The stories, the presents, the lights often awaken the child within us. Sometimes we revert back to the traditions and memories of Christmas past. If we're lucky, we see the wonder of Christmas through our own five year-old eyes. And with a five year-old heart, we trust it completely.

A friend who writes poetry recently gave me this poem as a gift:

Cuddled in the cocoon of their homes
Children wait
Children listen – for the sounds of the sleigh –
The footsteps of the reindeer telling
them that jolly St. Nick has remembered them.
Drifting – slowly drifting – they close
their sleepy eyes and travel to that place
of visions often lost by day.
As the new day dawns,
Their stories of reindeer and sleigh bells
brighten our hearts.

Let the children sing their joys of things we cannot see.
For they have seen – they have heard
The children know
The children will always know
what every heart yearns to find.

Let your child hear the ever so
subtle tinkling of the chimes –
from the One who always remembers you.

Back to Bethlehem we go
where the One who always remembers us is born.

Now, back to Bethlehem sounds a little like “back to the basics” don’t you think? As we draw nearer to the manger, as we approach Bethlehem, we come closer to the basic truth claim of our faith – that God so loved the world, that God became human in Jesus Christ so that all might be reconciled to God through him our Savior. There is a basic fundamental truth about the Christmas event that’s always good to get back to this time of year.

But to say we are getting “back to the basics” can also be misleading. The phrase has become common in recent years. Everyone from politicians to school teachers advocates a return to that which is fundamental, in government or in the educational system, whatever the case may be. Even though advocates of “back to the basics” often disagree with each other over what the basics actually are, they agree that getting back to the basics will reestablish a sense of security that has been lost somehow, a sense of stability and protection.

And security is what we want, isn’t it? Consumer advertising suggest it is. For example, ads for overgrown SUVs suggest that the more space we take up on the pavement, the safer we will be. Forget that the depletion of oil reserves energized by gas-guzzling SUVs actually makes our country less safe and more dependent. Of course, the recent presidential race has taken our concern for national security to new heights of paranoia. How can we best keep America secure, the candidates debated, even as they all acknowledged that it is not matter of whether another terrorist attack on American soil will occur, but when.

The ads, the politics, they resonate with us. Security is what we want, understandably. We want to believe that we can be protected from unexpected events, whether they come from foreign attackers or simply from the challenges of living in middle America. I don’t think we are wrong for wanting to feel secure. After all, I do believe that in God’s kingdom all creatures are protected from harm’s way. And if we are supposed to help bring about that kingdom in the world today, then security seems a noble pursuit.

But here’s the problem: When we get back to Bethlehem, when we get back to the basics of the Christian story, what we find is not particularly stable or secure.

First of all, God chose to come into the world, to redeem the world ... through a baby. Babies are terribly vulnerable. I read somewhere that human babies are the only mammals on earth that cannot care for themselves upon birth. They are completely dependent on others to keep them alive and safe. God didn’t come as a king or a president or a hero who can protect us. God came as a baby needing protection. That was a bit unsettling to early Christians who expected the Messiah to be a military ruler who would restore Israel to power. And I suspect when we really think about it, it’s a bit unsettling to us. God deigned to arrive in our midst as a humble, helpless baby. Theologians call it God “condescending” to us, as in the opposite of “ascending” or going up. God came down, condescended to us.

The other not-so-stable part of this story is Mary’s song, which we read and heard last Sunday. Mary’s song ascribes to the arrival of this Savior, a great reversal of fortune – the privilege of the rich and powerful is turned upside down, the poor and

powerless are exalted. She sings, "He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Lk 1:51-53).

This is not a God who will maintain the status quo. This is not a God who is concerned about our sense of security. This is a surprising God who does the unexpected. This is a merciful God who exalts the poor when no one else will. This is the God of justice who upsets the rich and sends them away empty. This is the reconciling God who heals the sinner and frustrates the pious. This is the faithful God who saves through grace, not through rewards for work well done. This is the God who can turn the cosmos itself upside down and make stars fall before a darkened moon. This is not the kind of "back to the basics" idea that comforts us with a promised return to stability. Getting back to *this* basic stirs us up.

And yet, the great irony in the Christian story is that just when all of our security has been stripped away, just when we find ourselves helplessly turned upside down and inside out, just then, we recognize that our real security lies in God alone. For it is through the great reversal of the birth of Jesus Christ, that we are saved, reconciled, redeemed, and made whole. It is through our heavenly God coming down to us, that we are exalted to new life.

I wonder if this is why seeing Christmas through five year-old eyes might just be the ticket. It's not that as children we were blissfully unaware of how God might stir us up so we just cluelessly played along. Rather it is a child's ability to trust. Most every child I know longs to trust something – their parents, their friends, their routines, the stories and promises that are spoken to them. Many adults, having been betrayed by someone or something they trust, manage to avoid trusting others altogether ... even God. But children haven't yet lost that desire and ability to trust, and they search for something to trust even if all the evidence suggests they shouldn't. Of course, this gets them into trouble if the one they trust is harmful to them. And unfortunately this happens all too often. But a child's desire and ability to trust is a true gift before which we ought to stand in wonder.

When we look at Christmas through five year-old eyes, perhaps we will be able, once again, to trust our God who is doing a new and unexpected thing through the birth of the Savior, Jesus Christ.

Remember my friend's poetry:

Let the children sing their joys of things we cannot see.
For they have seen – they have heard
The children know
The children will always know
what every heart yearns to find.

Let your child hear the ever so
subtle tinkling of the chimes –
from the One who always remembers you.

Let us now trust God as we make our way back to Bethlehem where the One who always remembers us is born. Amen.