

The First Christmas Was Scary

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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Several years ago, I bought my first house. I thought I had gone through it all, to check and re-check that everything was in accordance with my purchase, but there turns out that there was one thing in the house. A trunk. I threw my first housewarming party for my friends and I, and eventually someone found this trunk. Now, this trunk was scary, and it was in the attic, and actually I have no clue why any of my friends were up in the attic to begin with, but they immediately clamored, “open it! Open it!” Now, folks, I was not about to open the spooky trunk in the house that was built in 1911 in the attic. I was content to live there for years and never open the trunk in fact. “I am the guy that yells at the TV screen during a horror movie to just get out of the house and put it up on the market and just refuse to be haunted! – Just leave the house!” And so, I was adamant that no spooky chests would be opened on my watch. But of course, my friends didn’t listen to that, and they opened the chest anyway, and there was only one object in that chest. It was this nativity set. I can think of no better illustration for what I want to talk about today – the tension between fear and love. I was about to miss out on this nativity set because it was in a spooky chest. In fact, I was going to leave this nativity set for someone else to benefit after we sold that house. The person that the fear would’ve hurt would have been me, and you know the scariest thing right? I wouldn’t have even known that I’d missed out. Life is like that. We can stay fearful and protective, but that’s not where the magic happens. The magic happens in “the arena” as Brene Brown puts it – it happens when we are vulnerable. It happens when we open the box.

The nativity story instantly takes me back to the first Christmas and trying to imagine what it was like. We have this idea that it was joy to the world, but it must have been a time of unparalleled anxiety for the holy family and their not-so-holy extended families. We see Joseph wrestling with what to do, and an angel having to step in for a pep talk. We know Mary was an unwed teenage mother, and that has never exactly been easy in our world, has it? We know that they faced the sort of open-ended questions that mark our lives today. What will happen? Will it be alright? Will the baby be healthy? Will I be able to make this work? Of course, we know that birth didn’t happen in adequate facilities – it happened in a feeding trough. And so, while to us, it’s all angels and glory and songs and myrrh, and gold, and incense. To those surrounding Mary and Joseph it must have been worry and difficulty and rumors and anxiety.

But we only have Christmas because they came through the other end of that. That first Christmas might not have been joy to the world, but everyone knows that after a baby comes, you start to re-evaluate some things. Many people have seen grandparents transform right in front of their eyes from fear and anger to excitement and awe and wonder. We know how quickly it can change. We know that our memories are editable and our experiences malleable. What was a manger and pain and toil, can seem like

angels coming down from heaven just a few short months or years on. That's a gift. Human beings are resilient.

But the Christmas story, if it is anything this season, is an invitation to move from fear to love. When we are fearful, we are unable to pursue flourishing in a way that is productive, creative, and wonder-filled. Instead we make decisions that are baffling to ourselves even one day later, but made sense at the time. Fear can get us to do some silly things in the name of self-preservation, but love invites us to vulnerability, to a shared experience with each other. Love is always moving us to seek the really real, to be present, to risk pain in the now, for growth later. It is moving us to act in the interest of flourishing of others, because that flourishing is bound up with our own flourishing. It is a recognition of mutuality.

That first Christmas was scary, but so is life right now. It takes courage and belief to live a life dedicated to love in these trying times. Just like it took courage in first century Palestine. It may be rougher, though, since we have very few heavenly messengers prepared to wait in the wings and give us pep-talks. And yet, we have a choice to make about how we treat others, about how we engage in the world. We can be nihilistic, we can be cynical, we can be in favor of mutually assured destruction, or we can dare to believe in miracles at Christmastide, we can open the box and see what's inside.

To me that nativity set was its own strange Christmas miracle in November. It made me think about a lot of things. Our Christmas miracle in these trying times, to me looks like accountability for our leaders in the high places of this nation and in our spiritual communities. I don't know how it will go in our nation's impeachment process, but I am committed to pursuing an ideal of moral leadership here by being transparent, open, and honest about what our issues are and what we can do about them.

At Lake Street Church we do control the outcomes of our community. We can be scared about the future, or we can dare to believe that our best years are in front of us. To me, that seems easy to believe after the last 9 months. I am excited to see what we can put together, but we will have to believe in a future that is one of flourishing. Our future will be determined by how many people will dare to open the box and see what's inside. I see so many people here opening the box, some for the first time in a long time. I commend you for that. That takes courage. Thank you for opening the box.

That's on a small scale and focused on this community, but I would put it to you like this: as a country, we will be able to find a path forward from impeachment to flourishing only if people decide to open the box. To love others more than themselves. To seek something about self-profit. I saw one group open the box this week at Christianity Today – a moderate Evangelical magazine, which I find to be, no offense intended, boring. Worried about a moral failure in the Trump presidency, they asked their readers to love Jesus more than political power. I hope they hear that message. I hope they open the box. I pray that they will.

It's almost enough to make you lose hope, that the moral outrage of this president has caused so many people to fear opening their box, to fear risking love, to play it safe and live in fear. But then you remember that it wasn't all angels and joy to the world at first. The first Christmas was scary. And look how that turned out. Christmas miracles do happen. And what can I say? I'm a sucker for a good story. I think we could all use one about now. I'd say that we're right at about the point when angels show up, if they're going to. Let's see what happens when we open the box.