

Christmas Eve Reflection

Lake Street Church of Evanston

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How do you mark a day so holy and so serene as Christmas, where Love has come down to dwell with us once again? There has always been consternation around how to celebrate Christmas. Indeed, one of my favorite stories is that the star of Bethlehem, a literal silver star that was inlaid in the floor of the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem where Jesus was born was stolen in 1847 in a scuffle over rights to the nativity, and rights to Christmas, and its theft contributed directly to the Crimean War, a war in which several hundreds of thousands of people were killed and wounded. Or take the place I just came from, where Puritans and their residual influence meant that the Commonwealth of Massachusetts just didn't do Christmas. All the institutions were open for business. It just shouldn't be celebrated, too much merriment may be had and, the Puritans feared, merriment would lead to drinking.

So, what do we do with this story – with the shepherds, the angels, the drama of it all. What do we do with a story of an unwed teenage mother that gives birth to a son named Jesus? What are we to make of it? How ought we to mark it?

Well, I think that the authors of the Gospels began relatively uninterested in the birth narrative. Mark, the first Gospel is like Action Comics 1 –the first appearance of Super Man. Jesus is on the scene binding the strong man, casting out demons. A man,. The first Gospel didn't have time to tell you how Jesus got there. Later writers wondered about it and put a story here for a reason and they wanted to tell you something very specific I think about how the Divine works in history.

Now, if you were all-powerful, you probably wouldn't choose to become vulnerable, but that's precisely what happens in this story. The Divine comes to earth as a baby and there is nothing more vulnerable than a baby. In the words of Dorothee Soelle, "God did not come to earth armored in a tank." God came to earth as a baby, and that fact ought to give us pause to consider what matters to the Divine in this world. That ought to surprise us, and if there's anything about Christmas worth noting is that it's a surprising celebration of the human. It's a surprising way for God to come into the world. It's surprising, and in my experience, the surprises in the spiritual life have the ring of truth in them.

You see Christmas is the triumph of the humble, the meek, the vulnerable, over the great ones. Herod comes to nothing, even with all his violence and genocide. The angels, though they are celestial can only advise the shepherds. Jesus, born in a manger calls only fishermen and not the learned as his disciples. It is the triumph of the human in all its frailty and farce. It is a story about the Divine dwelling here in a place with all its

imperfections. It is about the fear of those who see angels or who experience a birth of their child and them coming through the other side to love and truth and forgiveness.

If you are to commemorate Christmas, I would like you to add one more aspect to your traditions this holiday season. Think about power differently. We confuse power and physical strength or political strength, but the true power here comes from a different source. When we say that God is in the manger as Bonhoeffer put it, then we are saying that we believe in a different value system. One that believes in justice, equality, love for all, one that believes that the humble are championed at Christmas. We must believe in something more than the naked exercise of power in these times. Something more than the vain pursuit of profit. And what better thing to believe in than the manger, the Christ, the miracle of birth, the idea that another world is possible if we believe in a different sort of power. Who knows? If you let it, the story may even surprise you – here's hoping that you are surprised by the love of God in your midst this holiday season. Blessed Be.