

Christmas Eve 10:30 pm 24 Dec 2017

When Jesus Is Born

The Rev. Deborah Woolsey

Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

When John William Smith was a high school teacher in the inner city, he desperately wanted to teach his students about what Christmas means to him. All of John's students were inner city teenagers; they had never known anything other than devastating poverty which may be why they were, in his words, tough and violent; yet he wanted to teach them something other than what they had always known. He wanted to introduce them to kindness, and believed Christmas was the way to do it.

John talked with his school's principal and received permission to put up a Christmas tree in his classroom. And John didn't skimp on the tree; it was a 12-foot-tall blue spruce that he estimated was somewhere between 8 to 10 feet in diameter. The tree was so large, he needed two of his students to help him get it through the school's doors, up the stairs, and into his classroom where John placed the tree smack dab in the middle of the room. That year, John had decided, curriculum would take a back seat to Christmas.

The task for decorating that big beautiful tree was one of the assignments John gave his 120 students; each of them was charged with bringing one ornament from home to put on the tree. Here is where John learned his first Christmas lesson about his students. He imagined this would be a lovely assignment where his students would describe the ornament they brought in, tell its story and connection with their family and everyone would listen, learn something about each other and peace on earth would begin. But that's not how it went down.

Turns out, instead of being the start of peace, the tree was just another occasion for his students to do (in John's opinion) what they did best: fight. Most students, he observed, did not bring beloved family ornaments. Most of his students brought in crudely made homemade ornaments or cheap ornaments that looked new, perhaps purchased just for the assignment. Which might mean they didn't have ornaments from home to contribute. Instead of telling about where the ornament came from, as I said, the students fought. John recalls that it didn't take much to start a fight. If a student put their ornament where someone else wanted to put theirs, they fought. If someone accidentally knocked an ornament off the tree, there was a fight. If a student didn't bring an ornament or brought two instead of one, there was a fight.

Although John recalls this being a frustrating moment for him, as the oldest of 4 children, it reminds me of many Christmases decorating the Christmas tree with my family. Because of the excitement of the tradition and the reality of getting closer to Christmas, there were always fights about who got to put up what ornament, and

where, and no fight was as brutal as who got to put the angel on the top of the tree. After it was all over, though, my siblings and I always thought the tree was beautiful and the fights were long forgotten as there were other things to focus on. We moved on because, you know, Christmas was coming.

And it was in that Spirit that John pressed on trying to teach his students about Christmas and what it meant to him. He told his students that he was going to read them some stories of Christmas like Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* and O. Henry's *The Gift of the Magi* but those stories wouldn't make much sense without first reading what we all just heard again tonight, the story behind it all, the story of Jesus' birth from the Bible. John explained to his students that it was against the school rules to read the Bible in class, so he wanted their permission to do so. John recounts that when his students learned it was against the rules to read the Bible in school it wasn't just okay with them, they insisted on it.

So, John read from the two Gospels that give an account of Jesus' birth: the one in Matthew's Gospel, and the familiar account from Luke's Gospel that we just heard; where Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem because of an oppressive government, and in their poverty Mary gave birth to the Son of God far from home and had to place to her newborn infant in a box for feeding animals. And the news of this birth was announced not to family and friends, or the important people of society, but to shepherds, people literally on the outside, and this birth invited them to come in from where they were to be in the presence of God with Us.

John says the transformation he saw come over his students as he read them this Christmas Gospel was amazing. They were rapt with attention, they listened, a few even started to cry, and if someone tried to make fun of the person who cried, another student stood up for them, and (this part really impressed John), they did so without threat of violence like when they fought. It was then John realized most of his students had never heard the story so many of us here tonight might be well acquainted with, the story that is remarkable for all it has in common with how every person comes into the world, and extraordinary in that in this birth God became intimately joined with humanity by becoming human and dwelling with us, not as a warrior, president, king, or other stereotypically strong leader, but as vulnerable as you can get: as a helpless infant born to parents who certainly were far from wealthy and privileged.

Later John's students shared with him that they could relate to Jesus because they too were oppressed by poverty and the powerful who seemed to want to keep them not only in financial poverty but in spiritual poverty as well. In the Mystery of the Incarnation, in God becoming human in Jesus and being born as a helpless baby, John's students got what a lot of us can miss: that it really happened, and because it really happened, because Jesus really was born all those years ago, it means God really loves

us, so much so that God is actually willing to be with us in this world, with all of its injustices, its ugliness, its cruelty, its violence, and its beauty and joys and all its potential for good. John's students realized that meant God didn't just love the rich and powerful, those whose lives they could never imagine, God noticed them and God loved them too.

And so, Jesus, who once was physically born in poverty, was born once more, when hearts that had been hardened by poverty were changed, were transformed, were opened by the beautiful and holy vulnerability of the Incarnation and Jesus found new hearts to dwell in. That is Christmas; that is what we have gathered together to celebrate tonight. Not just when Jesus was born all those years ago, not just when angels appeared in skies to shepherds now long gone on hillsides far from here. We hear this Good News of Great Joy for all people every year to help us learn to recognize when Jesus is born in hearts, in our hearts and the hearts of others, and to see the Incarnation is as real and relevant and current today as it was when it first happened.

I am richly blessed in this ministry at Church of the Good Shepherd where I try to be a vulnerable incarnational presence by showing people God is here and God is love as I to minister with students and faculty who are willing to be vulnerable and share their experiences and stories with me, and this is how I know Christ is still being born in human hearts today.

This semester alone I've encountered many such hearts, two of which I want to share with you this Christmas Eve, because of the good news of great joy I see in them. One is a young woman who asked to photograph me as part of a portrait assignment for one of her classes. As she took my picture repeatedly for more than two hours, we talked and listened to each other's stories. She asked me a lot of questions about my faith, not just my beliefs, but my faith and how it affects my every decision. I then asked her about her faith and learned she is an atheist because that is how she was raised, and so has no faith. I then asked her why she chose a person like me as a subject for her project, and she said something that has stayed with me, something I just can't shake. She told me she is impressed by how people of faith walk through times of adversity. And when I asked her how she gets through difficult times she responded simply, "Not well, not the way I want." This young woman went on to tell me of the poverty she knows she has, and her struggle with not wanting to disrespect her family, but at the same time is longing for something so many of us can take for granted. Something that I believe is growing in that young woman, and I believe will be born in her when the time is right.

The other heart I had the honor of being present with is a young man who, like many, had walked away from his faith, having been raised a Roman Catholic. He had believed religion was all rules and none of them really helped him. Then he found

himself given the opportunity to play a character from the Bible in a play; the trouble was it was a character he had been raised to believe was a bad guy: Judas Iscariot. Facing the many challenges of the role made this young man reflective, and he realized he couldn't get through this situation without prayer. So, he returned to prayer, and in so doing returned to God; only this time he found himself connected with Jesus more and through Jesus he was discovering God is not an angry God who hates people, but instead is a God who is love, who is mercy and forgiveness. Hearing this young man tell me all this gave me such delight because that is Christmas; that is why God became flesh and dwells among us, to show us what we have gotten wrong, to show us God doesn't hate anyone of us, God loves us, and God misses us, and God longs to just to be with us, no matter what we happen to be up to, or where we are. Even more, God was itching for an opportunity to invite us back into God's dream for us, to work with us to make the world a little less poor in spirit and a little more alive with God's love, forgiveness, mercy and generosity.

That is what began in Bethlehem so long ago, and it continues today. When it would be so much easier to succumb to the general sense of cynicism and disappointment and even downright anger that seems to be so prevalent everywhere you look; whether it's the news, opinion pieces, social media, even in gatherings of family and friends, instead we can all be beautifully counter cultural by being so very Incarnational, by recognizing when Jesus is born among us, and by being as vulnerable as Jesus by being present among our fellow human beings in ways that show God's love. Listening, standing with the oppressed without use of violence, forgiving those who hurt us, moving on from past hurts, and doing what we can to show God's love is as real as we are, and just as simple and extraordinary, and is with us, not just at Christmas, but whenever and wherever Jesus is born in human hearts: be it in classrooms, dorm rooms, homes, and maybe even churches on Christmas Eve.

Merry Christmas.