

CHRISTMAS MAGIC
Sermon for Christmas Eve- Lk 2:1-20
LPC, 12/24/17

There is no doubt that Christmas Eve is a magical time, is there? There is something so special about coming out for a Christmas Eve Service. Coming to church in the dark makes everything different. The candlelight, the profusion of poinsettias and the barely contained excitement of the children combine to raise everyone's sense of anticipation.

It is no wonder that such a state of heightened consciousness has given rise to countless legends that embroider the basic story that we just heard from the Gospel of Luke: the one about the census that required Mary and Joseph to travel to Bethlehem, where the inns were so crowded the expectant couple had to shelter in a stable with the animals. And how the baby was born there in the straw, in the most humble of circumstances. And yet, this humble birth was the occasion of rejoicing in heaven. And the first people to receive news of this universe-altering event were not the rich and powerful but shepherds, a particularly low class of person.

Many of the nonbiblical legends that have attached themselves to Christmas pick up on this theme of the king who is above all kings being born in the most humble of circumstances and made manifest to the most humble of people.

To mention a few of these apocryphal stories: We all know the charming one about how on Christmas Eve the dumb animals are blessed with the gift of speech, so that even the humblest of creatures may praise God. Then there's the Little Drummer Boy, who is so poor he has nothing to give the Holy Child except a performance on his tiny home-made drum. Never mind that a child banging on a drum is the last thing you want in the same room with a newborn. It's still a charming story.

Another story that picks up on the theme of a poor child offering his only possession to the Christ Child is Amahl and the Night Visitors, where, because of his generosity Amahl is cured of his lameness as a sign from God.

If you know me, you know that I am a cat person, and if you know my cats, you know they are tabby-cats, so one legend that has always appealed to me is about a barn cat who warmed the newborn Christ and soothed him to sleep with its purr. In gratitude Mary is said to have caressed the cat's head. The characteristic markings on a tabby-cat's forehead are therefore said to be the thumbprint of the Virgin Mary. Did you know that one?

In contrast to these embellishments on the Christmas story there is another impulse to simplify the Christmas story and try to imagine what it really must have been like, realistically speaking, for a pregnant couple to shelter in a stable, give birth, and try to get their heads around the angels' message that this baby was the Son of God.

Sometime during the past few weeks I saw a painting that someone put up on Facebook of the Holy Family soon after the birth. Naturally I failed to get the citation and have not been able to find it again to give it a proper attribution, but the image has stayed with me.

The scene is of the Holy Family only, visitors not having yet arrived. The color scheme is mostly dark and brown. The child is in the manger, but Mary is reclined in exhaustion rather than kneeling in adoration, as she undoubtedly would have been after labor and delivery, if you really think about it. Joseph's head and shoulders are bowed, less in prayer than in an apparent sense of being overwhelmed. And who could blame him, given what he has experienced?

Naturally there is a light source. Artists are always concerned with the light source. In this painting the light source is not from a window or a star but from the Child in the manger. The light from the manger plays delicately on the faces of the adults.

As realistic as this particular portrayal is of a couple in the aftermath of childbirth, the artist still makes a statement of belief. The Child is the source of Light. So in addition to giving us a new, perhaps more humanly accurate, view of what the first Christmas was like, the picture tells us something theological.

What has overcome Mary and Joseph in this picture is not awe and gratitude but fatigue and incredulity. Yet the light of Christ shines. The light of Christ does not depend on their awareness and response. It shines anyway and continues to shine. It will always shine.

If there is anyone here in this room tonight for whom the magic of Christmas is evasive because of a recent grief, a depressed spirit or a fatigued numbness, do not despair. Do not feel an outsider because you can't identify with the happy, expectant faces around you. The light of Christ still shines, and it will find you.

If you are one of the happy and expectant ones, there may come a time when the joy and anticipation fade and you just feel flat. If and when that happens, do not despair. The light of Christ still shines, and it will find you again.

Next Sunday we will read from the Gospel of John: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." The Christmas light, having come into the world, will henceforth shine forever, whether or not we are always aware of it. It will always shine.

That is the true magic of Christmas.