

Christmas Eve A
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2016
Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20

OUR VULNERABLE GOD

Let us pray. Immanuel, illumine us with your light this night as we kneel before the manger, and kindle in us a life of compassion which no darkness can overcome. Amen.

Taking out the garbage—it's a task we all have to deal with one way or another. For me, it's a Monday night affair, and most of the time a job that just needs to get done.

But there's one thing that can make me linger—and even look forward to that evening trudge down our long driveway to the street. On rare winter nights when the sky is clear and the moon absent, the trip hauling trash turns ineffable when, looking upward, I find stars looking back.

In those moments my world expands exponentially, and my small, inward-looking, Erik-centered domain takes a back seat to the vast realm of the cosmos. And I feel at one and the same time both infinitely smaller and inconsequential, and an integral part of the deep-time drama that's been running for nearly 14 billion years.

On a good night, bright Venus is there, hanging above the western horizon. While directly south, above the rooflines and fir trees, Orion, The Hunter, is making his annual circuit across the winter sky.

The distance between Earth and the stars of the constellation Orion varies greatly; from 243 light years to the closest star, Bellatrix, to 1,600 light years to the Orion Nebula—an immense star nursery nestled in The Hunter's belted sword.

The light we see emanating from the Orion Nebula is light that began its journey to Earth around the year 400, when Rome was being sacked by the Visigoths, and the Empire was in its final days.

If we had a telescope, of course, many more stars would come into view. Astronomers estimate there are roughly 80 million stars within 2000 light years of Earth. Which means that the light of some stars in our nighttime sky began traveling toward us the very night Jesus was born.

These 80 million are, of course, a tiny sample from within a small section of a single arm of the spiral-shaped Milky Way galaxy—which itself is but one of the estimated 200 billion galaxies that make up our universe.

In her book, Bright Evening Star, Madeleine L' Engle asks:¹

Was there a moment, known only to God, when all the stars held their breath, when the galaxies paused in their dance for a fraction of a second, and the Word, who had called it all into being, went with...love into the womb of a young [woman] Power. Greater power than we can imagine, abandoned, as the Word knew the powerlessness of the unborn child.

This night, as we light candles against the darkness and raise our voices in song, we pause to wrap our minds around this truth: that the Creator of a universe vast beyond our imagining should choose to become so small, so intimate with us, sharing our vulnerability and weakness, our susceptibility and suffering.

¹ From *Bright Evening Star: Mystery of the Incarnation*. Harold Shaw Pub, 1997.

This night we marvel, that this One “who set the stars in motion, has entered into our inconsequential world and into our inconsequential flesh in the womb of blessed Mary.”²

In the painting **Festival of Lights** by John August Swanson, a star-filled sky serves as backdrop to the gentle, undulating slopes of dark green hills; while in two great furrows between those hills an endless stream of children gathers and processes.

Each child bears a candle whose light illumines their face. At the center of the canvas these two great streams of light converge and you see in the children’s expressions a kind of resolute wonder and hopefulness.

Writing about his art, Swanson says:

The images I make are not for “art’s sake,” nor are they for pure self-expression...

When we are [brought] together...through [this] medium...we are in conversation, not only with each other but with the ancients, as well.

I pull from old roots to make a new thing... I try to make accessible and reaffirm certain values—caring for each other, acting as peacemakers, or something as simple as listening to someone who needs to be heard. **These values are all around us, are part of us, and I want to tell their stories.**³

The story this past year has told has been for many an alarming one; a story marked by fear-mongering, intimidation, manipulation, violence, and high anxiety about what 2017 will bring.

For those who feel vulnerable and targeted by proposed new policies this is especially true. Whether you’re feeling uncertain about the future or confident, the story Luke tells is instructive.

Luke frames Jesus’ birth by first making reference to the powers-that-be in the world—the shakers and movers; the ones who set the policies and call the shots.

He begins the story with figures the world can recognize and then does something unheard of: He ignores them completely.

Instead of taking us to Caesar’s palace—the logical place to go for the birth of a king—he turns Caesar Augustus into window dressing for the real story he’s about to tell...of two travelers and the Judean village which is their destination, and which becomes the birthing place of their first child.

The birth scene is unremarkable at first. A scene repeated for thousands of generations back to the beginning of humankind. A woman gives birth and wraps her child in a blanket.

But then Luke offers a few added details, which speak volumes:

“...and she laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

She laid him in a manger, a feed box for animals—as far from a crib in a royal nursery as you can get!

And so this child, whom Isaiah names Emmanuel—God with us, arrives in our midst incognito; makes his entrance into history through the lowliest port of entry we can imagine.

² Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Magnificat in this season of expectation*. [Holden Village Voice](#) Winter 2016-17

³ John August Swanson, *My Work as a Social Act*. [Holden Village Voice](#) Winter 2016-17

Luke pulls from old roots to make a new story; a story in which we discover God working without a net, emptying himself to become exposed and vulnerable.

- His first companions are the animals whose bodies heat the stable, whose breath keeps him warm.
- His first visitors are a group of mind-sprung shepherders with a tale of angels that has us wondering what they've been smoking.

Tonight, God is not “up there” somewhere; tonight God is not a great, anonymous force looking at us from a distance. No, tonight God takes on a specific identity, acquires a specific address.

For as it turns out, you see, God wants to be seen, touched, known—not from above, not from the heavens, but from below, as a newborn child—helpless, needy, dependent.

Tonight we are invited to throw our lot in with his. To fix ourselves to a hope which had once seemed light years beyond us, but which now, at Bethlehem, is as deeply bonded to us as the Babe to his mother's breast.

It is this same level of exposure, this same story of vulnerability and desire to inhabit the human story fully, without reserve, that will characterize the journey this child makes in life, “all the way through the alley,” and finally to the cross.

What does this story teach us?

- It teaches us that not only does the GOAL matter, the MEANS matters, too.
- It teaches us that because we put our trust in this Prince of Peace, the antidote for bullying, bigotry, and violence can never be more of the same.

As Reverend King has said:

“Returning violence for violence multiplies violence, adding deeper darkness to a night already devoid of stars....Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.”⁴

Where then does this story lead us?

- It leads us to the claim that the point of entry God chose at Bethlehem is the point of entry that all who love this Christchild must likewise follow.
- It leads us to see that the antidote for our fears can never be retribution but must always be compassion. For compassion for the little One who lies in the manger helps us make room for one another, and leads us to search for Jesus' face in the face of every person whom we meet.

“It's no use,” writes Dorothy Day “saying that we are born 2000 years too late to give room for Christ. Christ is always with us, always asking for room in our hearts.”⁵

She goes on...

“Among the first generations of Christians, when faith was a bright fire that warmed more than those who kept it burning, in every house a room was kept ready for any stranger who might ask for shelter; it was even called “the stranger's room”; and this not because...the man or woman to whom they gave shelter reminded them of Christ, but because—plain and simple and stupendous fact—he was Christ.”⁶

⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community*.

⁵ Quoted in *Watch for the Light*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) p.179ff.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pages 182-183.

Part of the miracle this night brings is the realization that Jesus himself companions us on the journey toward becoming fully human. A journey we make again and again.

Beginning here at the manger, he calls us from me-centered domains to a fully embodied grace; grace which moves us toward wholeness in ways and through people and circumstances we don't expect.⁷

At Christmas God pulled from old roots to make a new thing—and tonight we are witnesses.

But not only witnesses—participants, as we sing, as we pass the peace, as we resolve to love more completely and to forgive more freely; as we receive the gift of his very self, given and shed for the mending and healing of all things.

Amen.

⁷ Parker Palmer.