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Christmas Eve C
Peace, Seattle
December 24, 2012 epk
Luke 1:1-20

Let us bow our hearts in prayer. Emmanuel, descend into our hearts this night, bringing light for our darkness, hope for our sadness, healing for our brokenness. Touch us once more with the power of your presence as the vulnerable child who comes into our midst to redeem and save. In your name we pray. Amen.

RACHEL'S GIFT

In a poem entitled, On the Mystery of the Incarnation,[1] Denise Levertov speaks to the stark realities of our broken world, and the risk God has taken by entering into it fully as Jesus.
She writes:

> *It's when we face for a moment the worst our kind can do,*
> *and shudder to know the taint in our own selves,*
> *that awe cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart:*
> *not to a flower, not to a dolphin, to no innocent form*
> *but to this creature vainly sure it and no other is god-like,*
> *God (out of compassion for our ugly failure to evolve) entrusts,*
> *as guest, as brother, the Word.*

We have been witnesses of the *"worst our kind can do."* Tonight, we awaken to the awe and risk that *"cracks the mind's shell and enters the heart,"* God becoming flesh among us.

Against the "official version" of how the world is, was, and ever shall be, as the place wherein emperors make proclamations and governors flex their muscles, Luke's story introduces us to a sub-version of history that bends our fears and sadness toward hope. And the gravitational center of that hope lies in a manger.

Hope, for each of us, takes on differing shapes in the different seasons of our lives.
Yet in every case, for that hope to endure and to blossom into faith, it must be rooted in something—in someone—whose faithfulness endures even when ours does not.

Tonight, I share a story about how hope and faith reborn. I call it RACHEL'S GIFT.

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Even after all these years, the old dream would still pay Margaret its customary visit in December:

- The phone ringing in the dead of night.
- The officer's voice telling of her husband's accident and advising her to come right away.

And in the dream, as on that fateful night, she would, in excitement, take the wrong exit on the way to the hospital, and become lost in the maze of one-way streets that criss-crossed that part of town, until, finally, she would arrive at the Emergency Room, only to see reflected in the chaplain eyes the grim truth that her husband would not be coming home—that night, or ever.

There, the dream would end, and she would wake in a cold sweat, her body trembling.

[1] Denise Levertov, *The Stream & the Sapphire: Selected Poems on Religious Themes*

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With Christmas less than two weeks away, the dream was due to make its appearance anytime now, just as it had each one of the 9 years since Herman's death that Christmas Eve morning.

Margaret had no children, but she did have a niece—her lone sister Rachel's daughter, **Dawn**—so named because she had taken her first breath just before sunrise on Christmas Day.

Dawn's arrival in the world only hours after Herman's accident had brought some measure of consolation to the family, but it could not erase, for Marge, the utter senselessness of his death.

After the funeral, after Herman's unopened gifts were returned; after the cards and letters of acknowledgement were in the mail, and neighbors and relatives were back in their routines, Marge took down the Christmas decorations, the manger crèche, the ornaments and the lights, packed them carefully in their boxes, and then carried the boxes out and set them all on the curb for the garbage pickup.

She made a vow to herself that as long as she lived, Christmas would never be part of her life again. **Ever.**

It was not an easy vow to keep. Especially in a culture as obsessed with Christmas—at least the commercial version—as American culture tends to be this time of year. Suspending her newspaper subscription for December to avoid all the ads, helped, but only a little. So she unplugged her television, too, to avoid the flurry of Christmas specials and Wonderful Life reruns.

But these were only surface measures. After all, her real beef was with God, not popular culture. It was God with whom she was determined to win the showdown.

This year would be the 10th anniversary of Herman's death.

When her younger sister Rachel called on Thanksgiving and told her about the cancer, and how she would be starting treatment straight away, and how Christmas would hardly be Christmas this year, they cried together and then Marge, wanting to help somehow, suggested that Dawn come to spend the week before Christmas with her, at her home.

BUT WHAT WOULD YOU TWO DO? Rachel wondered aloud, knowing how Marge studiously avoided everything that had anything to do with Christmas, religious or otherwise.

DON'T YOU WORRY ABOUT US—Marge shot back, somewhat defensively.
LET ME TAKE CARE OF THAT—I'LL MAKE SURE WE HAVE A GOOD TIME TOGETHER.

By the time they had said their goodbyes, it was settled. Jerry would drive Dawn out the week before Christmas, and Marge would drive her back so Dawn could be home with her folks on Christmas Eve.

The moment she hung up the phone, Marge felt a twinge of regret.
What will I do to keep a 9 year old from getting bored? She thought. She needn't have worried.

The first night at Aunt Margaret's, after the dishes were cleared off the table, Dawn disappeared for a moment. When she returned, she had a large candle in her hands, and an earnest look on her face.

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MRS. WILSON TOLD US THAT BLUE IS THE COLOR OF HOPE, AND THAT IT'S THE COLOR THAT MARY WEARS IN ALL THE PAINTINGS AND PICTURES, Dawn informed her.

MRS. WILSON? Marge inquired.

MY SUNDAY SCHOOL TEACHER AT CHURCH. Marge nodded.

I TOLD DADDY I WANTED TO BRING ONE OF OUR BLUE CANDLES WITH ME ON MY VISIT, TO LIGHT EVERY NIGHT WHEN I SAID MY PRAYERS FOR MOMMIE.

ISN'T IT BEAUTIFUL, AUNTIE MARGEE? ... COULD WE LIGHT THE CANDLE NOW, AND SAY A PRAYER FOR MOMMIE? she asked.

The depth of her young niece's spirited faith caught Margaret off guard. How could she refuse?

VERY NICE, DEAR; OF COURSE, DEAR, she replied.

Marge opened the cupboard above the stove and located the box of matches.
I GUESS WE'LL BE NEEDING THESE NOW, WON'T WE? she said playfully, determined not to let this little ritual become too serious. DO YOU KNOW HOW THESE WORK?

Dawn nodded, and, receiving the matches, carefully struck one on the side of the box, and lit the candle. The wick took hold, and a steady flame added its illumination to the small kitchen.
AT HOME, WE TURN OFF THE LIGHTS, she said, seeking permission in her aunt's face.

Margaret nodded, and Dawn walked to the doorway and flipped the switch.
IT'S ALWAYS PRETTIER IN THE DARK, she said.

Marge nodded again, forcing a smile, as she felt a wave of resistance gathering within her.
She folded her arms, as if to protect herself from the simple power of the moment, but unfolded them when Dawn reached for her hands. Silence filled the room.

DEAR LORD, Dawn began, eyes squeezed shut in concentration.
PLEASE BE WITH MOMMIE TONIGHT.
PLEASE HELP HER TO BE STRONG AND TO GET BETTER EVERY DAY. IN JESUS' NAME. AMEN.

After the prayer, they sat there a moment, regarding the steady flame, light shining in the darkness.

WELL, DEAR NIECE, Marge said, finally, breaking the spell as she stood up and reached for the switch; I HAPPEN TO HAVE SOME NEW FINGERNAIL POLISH I'VE BEEN WAITING TO TRY OUT, HOW WOULD <u>YOU</u> LIKE TO BE MY MODEL?

Dawn's face broke into a grin as off they went to Margaret's bathroom.

When it was bedtime, Marge came in to say good night. She found Dawn lying quietly under the quilt, her hands folded behind her head.

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ALL SET, DAWNIE? she asked.

Dawn nodded, reaching up for a hug.

I HAVE NEARLY $30 SAVED UP FROM MY ALLOWANCE AND I WANT TO BUY MOMMIE SOMETHING SPECIAL FOR CHRISTMAS. COULD WE GO SHOPPING TOMORROW, AUNTIE MARGEE?

Marge felt herself flush. Oh, those Christmas crowds, she thought. What could she say? MAYBE NOT TOMORROW... she finally replied. BUT SOME TIME THIS WEEK. I PROMISE.

Over breakfast the next day they agreed that shopping in the morning would be best for avoiding crowds. Dawn had a particular gift in mind...an angel ornament. She knew her Mom would love that.

Their first stop was a KMART store on the east side of town. But nothing there caught Dawn's fancy.

Next, they tried the strip mall across the highway, but none of those stores had anything resembling what Dawn had in mind. Marge was almost resigned to heading for the big Mall, when another idea flashed in her mind.

I KNOW JUST THE PLACE, she announced, and she turned at the signal and headed downtown.

Marge hadn't been to this part of town in years. There was an Italian restaurant on 5th and Main that she and Herman had often gone to for special occasions. And right next to it was a little gift boutique that carried specialty items this time of year.

Over the years Herman had purchased several gifts for her from that store. It was the place he'd resorted to when he'd forgotten her birthday one year. He found a beautiful inlaid mother of pearl jewelry box. It cost him a small fortune, but she had responded so well to his gesture of remorse that he'd gone back there several times when he wanted something real special for her.

As she turned onto Main, Marge was pleased to see that the store was still in business.

A bell rang as they opened the door, and the aroma of cloves and cinnamon filled the air.

Every conceivable space was occupied with specialty items, large and small:

- Works of art, books, handmade toys, cards, candles, jewelry, stuffed animals.

In one corner stood a large Christmas tree, decorated to the hilt in white and gold.
A young woman welcomed them and offered them hot cider.

IT'S JUST AS I REMEMBER, Margaret sighed. HERMAN ALWAYS LOVED THIS PLACE. Suddenly, a flood of memories—good memories—engulfed her, and she felt Herman's presence in a way she hadn't experienced in years.

Dawn was captivated by the place; her eyes darted back and forth—there was so much to take in.

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WE'RE LOOKING FOR AN ORNAMENT, Margaret told the hostess. BUT NOT JUST ANY ORNAMENT. A VERY SPECIAL ORNAMENT. AN ANGEL ORNAMENT, she explained, exchanging smiles with Dawn. DO YOU THINK YOU COULD HELP US?

The hostess nodded as she beckoned the two of them to follow her. Back by the great tree they went, soon to discover the most wonderful variety and assortment of angel ornaments one could possibly imagine.

Dawn's face lit up as she picked up each boxed ornament, one by one, and compared its picture with the example hanging on the tree. It would be harder to choose than she'd thought!

As Margaret watched her delighted niece search for Rachel's gift, something at the edge of her vision caught her eye.

Next to the tree were the crèches, with Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, animals, and Magi created in a variety of styles from a variety of materials, from countries around the world.
It was a stunning collection.

One of the crèches was from Hungary. An exquisitely carved set identical to the one she and Herman had received their first Christmas together—the very one she had put out with the trash after his death.

She picked up the figure of Mary and turned her gently in her hands. A peasant girl, this Hungarian Mary; clothed in a long, cobalt blue wool skirt with a matching shawl and apron.

This Mary had always intrigued her. For on her face the artist had created such a mingled expression of joy and sorrow. A single tear graced Mary's cheek. Marge had always wondered whether the tear was purposeful or an accidental blemish. Now she knew.

This little revelation opened within her a door to a room she had not visited in a long, long time. This woman, too, she thought, knew the deep joy that accompanies love, and the inevitable pain that comes with losing what is most precious.

Marge felt a tap on her arm and turned to find Dawn holding before her the ideal ornament she had chosen for her mother, her face beaming with pride.

I FOUND IT, AUNTIE MARGEE, she sang. **THIS IS THE ONE!**

The angel, caught in mid-dance, wore a smile of perfect delight. Her tilted face looked upward, with one hand reaching toward heaven and the other pressed firmly over her heart.
The angel had a name: HOPE.

SHE'S PERFECT, DAWNIE. YOUR MOTHER WILL TREASURE IT, Marge said.

The hostess offered to assist Dawn in completing the purchase, while Margaret carefully set the Virgin Mary back in her place next to the Christchild.

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Much to the delight of Dawn, they took a detour on their way home, stopping in the Square to catch the performances of carolers and choirs from local schools and churches, and then catching a bite to eat at a restaurant near downtown.

By the time they got home, it was dark.

Dawn brought her gift package to her bedroom while Marge heated up some eggnog she'd picked up from the corner store on their way home. She found the tin of nutmeg in the back of her spice cupboard, and was placing their two warm mugs on the table when Dawn entered the kitchen with the candle in one hand and the dancing angel in the other.

As they enjoyed the eggnog, recalling their adventures and the successes the day had brought, a warmth filled the room which was greater than the sum of its parts.

Eggnog finished, the candle came out, and striking a match once more, Dawn brought the wick to life. Marge switched off the lights then joined her niece in contemplating the flame.

Hopefully, reverently, faithfully, Dawn offered up a prayer of thanksgiving for their day, and a prayer for the healing of her mother. She was about to say AMEN, when Margaret began to speak.

AND DEAR LORD, she began. THANK YOU FOR TOUCHING THIS HEART TODAY.
THANK YOU FOR GIVING HERMAN BACK TO ME. AND FOR INVITING ME BACK TO YOU...

Beloved of God. The hope that came into the world on the first Christmas takes root in our lives in so many ways. It invites us to dare to believe that the Creator of this vast universe wills our good.

And that within our lives, mingled with joy and sorrow, our truest hope for healing comes from putting our trust in him who became one with us, that we might become one with God, and find our lives transformed. Amen.