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Christmas Eve 2013

Well, we went to Disney World this summer. The kids were 6 and 4, just in the sweet spot for the Magic Kingdom. We aren't huge Disney consumers in our house, but it is nigh-on impossible to raise kids in the US without getting sucked in by the Mouse just a little bit. And so we went.

I expected excitement. I expected fun. I even, truth be told, expected that I might enjoy myself a teensy bit.

But here's what I didn't expect: my kids' pure unpolluted, undiluted belief in the magic and mystery of that strange other-world. From the moment she saw the famous castle for the first time, our four-year-old—she of the insuppressible imagination and unstoppable mouth-- prattled on like a self-assured tour guide telling us which princesses lived in which rooms, when their nap times were and how soon she would like to meet each one. The whole trip was marked by such experiences: the magic carpets that could really fly, meeting THE REAL Alice from Wonderland. I had, like so many of us boring old adults do, forgotten what it is like NOT to have to *suspend* my disbelief. There is, for them, no disbelief to suspend. There is only possibility.

Now Geoffrey, you can relax, I'm not going to compare belief in the incarnation to Disney Princesses. Although I'm sure there are a few pint-sized members of our congregation that would appreciate such a comparison.

But our adventure this summer did get me thinking about belief in general. There comes a time in the life of most growing human people when we are supposed to start questioning things. Considering the mixed age makeup of my congregation tonight, I won't name which things we are supposed to question, but suffice to say, it is considered developmentally appropriate to do so. It is, as they say, all part of growing up.

Many of you have heard me talk about Marcus Borg's wonderful differentiation between the capital-T Truth and the lower-t-truth. It is, for me, where the rubber meets the road in the theological belief question. The lower-t-truths are those things that are historically, scientifically or mathematically proven.  $2+2=4$ . The life cycle of a butterfly. Two hydrogens and one oxygen make water. The Declaration of Independence was signed in 1776. Lower-t-truths are things that are hard to argue about because we can see them (or we could with the right equipment). While lower-t-truths might not always be easy to understand, they aren't hard to accept.

Capital-T-Truths are different. Capital-T-Truths speak to something very real and very important that usually can't be quantified or proven. Like: time heals all wounds, love makes the world go 'round, peace in all things. These tell us less about the physical world and more about the human heart, its desires, its hopes.

These days, since the scientific revolution of the eighteenth century, capital-T-Truths are the basis for a lot of arguments. There's nothing to see, touch, feel or research, and therefore, there's nothing to prove. Skeptics who need that kind of physical proof dismiss these Truths as unfounded, unbelievable, useless. We live in a prove-it-or-lose-it world and God cannot yet be proven.

At this point, I would like to stress that this is a different discussion about belief from knowing everything there is to know about Tinkerbell. There may indeed be some capital-T-Truth in some of the magic of Disney, but that's not really where I'm heading here.

Our Gospels are chock full of big-T and little-t truths. We know historically that Jesus of Nazareth was born, taught and was crucified. Little-t-truth. And many of us know faithfully that his mother was visited by an angel, that he healed the sick and that he was raised from the dead. These are big-T-Truths along with the Truths that begin "A man was going down from Jericho to Jerusalem and he was attacked by robbers." And "There was a man who had two sons. The younger one said to his father, 'Father give me my share.'" And "A farmer went out to sow his seed."

Through these Truths, we learn about the world around us. We learn about human interaction, about how to treat one another. We learn about God's care for us and how to uphold our end of the covenants made on our behalf. "Love your neighbor" is Truth, as is "Love the Lord your God", as is "God gave his only begotten Son". These are the Truths in which we are asked to put our trust.

We in the Episcopal church love questions. As a general rule, we don't mind a challenge. There is much about the life of faith that is fluid. The water level in the well of belief is not frozen, but changes as the well fills and is emptied by the experiences we share as humans on this confusing planet. And because we encourage faith that engages the head and the heart, the questions will ebb and flow with that water table.

I have said before that God is bigger than our questions. I also believe that if we are wise enough to keep our eyes open, God will show us capital-T-Truthful answers to our questions all the time. For every heart-sickening event we humans have to witness, God is throwing loving Truth in our direction. For every tower that falls, there are firefighters that rush in. For every gunman that shoots, there are people that shield and communities that surround. Hearts surround, hands hold, minds open, God is before us and behind us and beside us. That is Truth.

Prisoner 46664 spent twenty-seven Christmases as a political prisoner in apartheid-riddled South Africa. Upon his release in 1990, Nelson Mandela had every logical reason to be brimming with hatred and venom ready to be unleashed on those who imprisoned him.

But instead, he changed the world. The fire he breathed was the refining fire of reconciliation. He spent the next twenty years changing the lives of individuals and of nations. Nelson Mandela was a Truth bearer. He showed how God's Truth can bring about change, how fragile, vulnerable human hearts can withstand great hardship and then produce even greater love. That is capital-T-Truth.

And now, back to Disney. It seems that as a general society we have come to treat these two kinds of truths rather like we treat princesses and talking cars: That these unprovable capital-T-Truths are the kind of thing we should rightfully grow out of.

Somewhere along the line, the lower-t-truth of Mary's virginity—both before and after the birth!-- became a topic of debate. There are websites and videos dedicated to the astronomical patterns that ACTUALLY PROVE THE TRAVEL OF THAT STAR on that night. There is this cultural need to prove, beyond a shadow of a doubt that these events were historically and scientifically accurate. People are seeking the truth-with-a-lower-case-t. and if they can't find it, than the Truth-with-a-capital-T can't possibly be worth believing. It is Tinkerbell theology hiding behind grown-up reasoning.

And I think that is a shortsighted and adolescent faith. I think we need to grow back *into* belief.

This evening's story is about a young mother and a miraculous birth, about a star and angels and startled shepherds. But to dismiss it as magical nonsense as so many are wont to do denies the very real Truth that the story reveals, regardless of the historical veracity of the details.

The Truth here is that God breaks in. God flips the ordinary on its head. God makes heroes out of bystanders. God infuses human hearts with courage and human minds with understanding beyond what we think we are capable of.

The Truth here is that there is no body too vulnerable that he can't save the world, no person too lowly that she can't be witness to a miracle, no creature too dumb that it can't play a part, no hay too scratchy that it can't line the bed of God.

Those are my found Truths this Christmas season. People far wiser than I have seen Truth in this story for thousands of years. I invite you as you bring your questions to this table over your own months and years and decades to come to look around and open your eyes to the capital-T-Truths in your life, the things held near and dear, unproven, unprovable. I invite you to relax into the Gospel, set aside your lingering doubts and live into the Truth.

May the God who is far greater than anything we can ever ask or imagine open our hearts and minds to the power of miracle and belief in this Christmas season.