

December 24, 2009

The Nativity of Our Lord, Year C

Luke 2.1-20

All Saints' Episcopal Church, Atlanta, Georgia

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Last year, I told you about the Advent calendar my aunt gave us. It is an Advent calendar unlike any I had seen before. The center nativity scene is painted on a thin sheet of metal, blank but for the stable and stars, and is surrounded by twenty-four little numbered boxes each with a tiny little door. Inside each door is a character from the story with a magnet on its back for us to stick into place.

Mary and Joseph, the innkeeper, shepherds and wise men all appear from behind their little doors to take their places in the ensemble. Baby Jesus, of course, waits to make his appearance until we open the little door marked "24" as we did this morning.

The creators of this little calendar are very creative since there aren't exactly twenty four characters in the real story. In our little scene, in addition to the usual cast, there are several sheep, a camel for each wise man, extra stars for the night sky and a whole herd of cattle.

This year, a week or so ago, I packed up our little Advent calendar and took it to Eli's preschool class. Always culturally sensitive, they had been studying Hanukkah and Kwanzaa and were beginning a lesson on different Christmas traditions.

I sat in a little chair with the calendar upright in my lap and told a watered-down version of our birth narrative, punctuated with audience commentary.

Mary ("*My aunt's name is Mary!*") and Joseph were two people that lived a long time ago. They were on a trip ("*I go on a trip to visit the beach with my Mommy and Daddy!*") and Mary was ready to have a baby ("*Mommy has a baby in her tummy!*") but there was no room in the inn, which is like a little hotel, for her to have the baby! So she had the baby out in the barn with the cows and the donkeys. ("*Were there cats? I have two cats at my house!*") Kings came to visit the baby and so did shepherds.

Then I let each child open a little door and put a magnet on the scene, but only as far as the current day. There were squeaks and squeals as each child pulled out a character and placed it in the picture. "Ooooooh, look, I got a star!" "Ha! You put the cow on the roof!" I thought the little girl who unveiled an angel was going to pass out from excitement. It was one of the best-spent half hours of my Advent.

"Christmas is for children," the greeting card companies and toy stores tell us. That is an easy adage to believe given the frenzy over the latest toy, the anxiety

felt by parents, the Santa Claus riots at the mall. It is easy for adults to stand back and watch the delight on children's faces when they see the lights go up around the neighborhood or count mysteriously wrapped presents piled up under the tree.

We adults, on the other hand, know that the world waits for no season. That a couple of days off work to open presents is no match for the loads on our minds. We have real life to worry about. We have uncertain jobs and big mortgages. We have our children's education to pay for and health concerns as we age. Moreover, we are concerned about healthcare, wars and the economy. Children can be joyful at Christmas. We have to be serious. We have to be responsible.

But friends, I want to challenge that notion. Here, as we celebrate our Savior's birth on the eve of the Big Day, I want to challenge the idea that Christmas is for, by or about kids. I think the reason we've come to believe that is because children are terrible at masking joy. Until they hit the teenage years, kids have terrible poker faces. It took me exactly half an hour, one magnetic Advent calendar and a room full of three year olds to come up with this hypothesis.

In that half an hour, 14 kids of various cultural and religious backgrounds shared the story of Bethlehem, Mary, Joseph, the sheep, kings, star and angel with such excitement and vigor that it renewed my own excitement about the coming of Christmas.

I wholeheartedly believe that Christmas should be for children. Children are natural masters of joy and the season of Christmas brings out the best of that. The wonder of it all, the mystery and the anticipation, the final exultant release of boundless joy: these are some of what childhood is about after all.

But I also think that this is yet another place where a little child (or children, as it were) can lead us all. Christmas is for children, yes, but it is also for adults: singles and marrieds, divorced, widowed, childless, parents, grandparents.

Christmas is for adults because we, too, must figure out a way to take hold of that contagious joy, to make it our own, to enwrap ourselves in the mystery and anticipation lest our hearts turn to stone and this miraculous story passes us by again, just another year, just another square on the calendar.

After all, what right do we have NOT to be joyful? The Christ child, tiny and soft, was born into this world for us, each of us, every one of us. This story was—and is— about God's proclamation of a love so deep and so wide it could only be contained in a vessel as perfect, miraculous and potential-laden as that of a baby.

Our worries, our anxieties, our concerns are valid and important and will not disappear for a few days just because we want them to or just because the calendar tells us it is December 25. But if we listen to this story of gift, of love and of miracle and are not moved by joy, then we are missing something important.

This is Christmas, friends, *Christmas!* I am not talking about the sentimental Christmas of Currier and Ives, cookies and stockings. I mean the mind-blowing, heart-breaking first Christmas of 2000 years ago when a young woman birthed a baby in a barn assisted only by her confused but steadfast husband then laid that baby in a feed trough and stepped back to look in wonder at what she had done.

The world turned over that day.
Heaven and earth moved that day.
The angels sang “Glory to God” that day.
And I have no doubt that on that day even God wept great tears of joy.

This is a wonderful story that inspires children to don cottonball sheepskins and halos of gold garland, to parade around the church with awe and glee, to fill an Advent calendar with anticipation.

But this is also a story that should bring proper grown adults, we with heavy hearts and weary minds, to our knees in gratitude, to Joseph who said “yes” to an angel, to Mary who carried that baby in her womb and in her arms, and gratitude always to God, who gave a gift of surpassing value, this wild and incredible love, this hitherto unheard of extravagance, this INCARNATION, God made flesh, EMMANUEL, God with us.

Be joyful, my friends. Hear the story, weep with joy. Christmas is not only for children. It is for every one of us loved by God unconditionally and without question. As no one escapes that love, so no one can escape the joy of being a child of God.

“I am bringing you good news of *great joy* for *all* the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”