

Christmas Eve, 2019
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Christmas: Go Home and Be Loved

Let us begin by giving God thanks – the simplest prayer of all is “thank you” -- that we have gathered again this year to celebrate the birth of Christ. In churches around the world this night – from the smallest village in West Africa, to the ancient Christian communities in South India, to our own companion parish in Cuba – we too gather to sing, to pray, and to reclaim this feast day and remember its fuller meaning in our lives. The Christmas equation is clear and eternal: Jesus, Emmanuel = God with us.

There is an expression tossed around that goes like this: “Go big or go home.” Politicians are keen to use it after being recently elected with a desire to do great things. Coaches have been known to refer to when they make a gusty call: fourth down and two yards to go. It can encourage someone to be extravagant, to do whatever you are doing to its fullest. (urbandictionary.com) How about for preachers? On Christmas Eve? Go big or go home? Those are my choices? I’m not so sure the expression works.

First, it would be fair to say that the staff here at Christ Church spend a good deal of time trying to understand and respond to the changing world around us – especially how it impacts how we do church. Sunday mornings are no longer our exclusive domain, as any parent of school age children in the Exeter area knows that far too well. We are using new technology and platforms to communicate our programs and mission – sending out email blasts and posting pictures and events on social media. Just this past Fall we used an online survey to gather information about how we might deepen our faith and grow spirituality – comparing our results with churches around the country. Pretty interesting stuff.

Yet, if our impulse is to innovate to keep up with changing times lest we fall behind, much of that comes to a hard stop when it comes to Christmas. For me, this night, this season, is not about trying something new and different, better or faster -- it is less about innovation and more about preservation. Tradition looms large. We change very little in the service each year. The carols and hymns we sing are the ones we almost always sing. It is not so much about “go big or go home,” but finding a way to allow the story to be told and speak its own truth.

What I hope we do tonight is to give ourselves a collective time out and pause to listen again. In the words of the great theologian Taylor Swift: “You need to calm down, you're being too loud, you need to just stop.” We can, for a moment, resist rushing into the future long enough to hear again this ancient story about a holy family and their journey to Bethlehem. We can try to place ourselves in that story and rediscover how a baby born in a simple stable shows us something about the God in whom we believe or want to know more deeply.

We need to calm down, get quiet and stop.

I treasure a poem by John Shea entitled Sharon's Christmas Prayer. There is a copy of the poem in the bulletin should you want a copy.

*She was five,
 Sure of the facts,
 And recited them
 With slow solemnity
 Convinced ever word
 was revelation.
 She said
 they were so poor
 they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
 to eat
 and they went a long way from home
 without getting lost. The lady rode
 a donkey, the man walked, and the baby
 was inside the lady.
 They had to stay in a stable
 with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
 but the Three Rich Men found them
 because a star lited the roof
 Shepherds came and you could
 Pet the sheep but not feed them.
 Then the baby was borned.
 And do you know who he was?*

*Her quarter eyes inflated
 To silver dollars.
 The baby was God.*

*And she jumped in the air
 whirled round, dove into the sofa
 and buried her head under the cushion
 which is the only proper response
 to the Good News of the Incarnation.*

(John Shea, from *The Hour of the Unexpected*)

Why I am drawn to this poem so?

For one, who does not love hearing stories of truth seen through the real and imagined lives of children? Children can often see things, at times, more clearly. They can speak with an unguarded honesty – that yes sometimes it can get awkward.

What is the truth that the child sees? She sees that Joseph, Mary and the unborn Jesus were a long way from home but never lost.

We are used to hearing and using the metaphor that “life is journey.” I say it often. “He’s on a journey, it’s OK. She will figure it out in time.” It would be little more than a tired cliché if it were not so true. Yet there are moments, sometimes years, when being on a journey can feel as if we are wandering around and not making the progress we want. It can feel as if we have not yet arrived to wherever it is we had wanted to go. It can feel that we have lost our way.

Remember that the story of the faith for Jews, Christians and Muslims begins with another holy family, Abraham and Sarah, who set out on a journey far away from their home country and because God told them to go. It continued with Moses, guiding his people 40 years through the wilderness before they would reach the Promised Land. In the last days of his life on earth, Jesus left his home in Galilee and set his face towards Jerusalem. The Apostle Paul walked and sailed far and wide to tell everyone who would listen how God is a God of the living – how he went from being a persecutor of Christians to the most tireless ambassador of the new emerging faith. Each one of use here tonight is on a journey. Sometimes lonely, sometimes joyful, often ordinary and still remarkable.

With God’s help, and some cooperation on our part, we can find a place in our lives where even if we ever wander far away – like the prodigal son who squandered away all he had been given by his father – that God allows us time and space we rediscover who we are and whose we are. It is never too soon or too late. We are given moments to see what is truly important in our lives.

The child in the poem said they – the lady, the man and the baby – were poor. Only PB&J sandwiches to eat on the journey. They were poor, which probably meant in her eyes they had very little.

It is risky business to over-idealize those the Bible refers to as poor. What we can learn is a different response from the “go big or go home” culture that dominates. We can learn what is enough—and what is simply too much, wasteful and excessive.

“Give us this day our daily bread” we pray in the Lord’s Prayer. Give us what we need for today and an open heart to share with others. May we desire and work for a most just world.

The baby Jesus we see at Christmas grows up, and in the few brief years of his public ministry spends much of his time teaching, healing and reaching out to those on the margins and edges. What the Gospel reveals is that the journey to know and experience the fullness of God is most likely found working our way from the outside-in, from the last to the first, and from the bottom up. A stable in Bethlehem, an animal feeding trough for a bed, was good enough for God.

The Apostle Paul wrote in Philippians: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.” Philippians 4:8

If not “Go big or go home”? I need something to offer, this is Christmas Eve after all!

I’ll keep the “go” part. How about... “Go deeper.” Go beyond scratching the surface of the mystery that we celebrate this night. Set aside more time for silence and simple prayer.

“Go farther” out to the edges of our inner circles and see who might need a helping hand, some encouragement, or someone to listen.

“Go back” and revisit those parts or moments of your lives that have never fully healed and see how God plants seeds of forgiveness.

“Go to places that might mean we will have to face our greatest fears – remembering what the risen Christ promised those who would follow him: “I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

“Go into the darkness” of our world and bring the light of Christ.

As I close, unlike the child in the poem I cited tonight, we may not jump up in the air, whirl around, dive into the sofa and bury our heads under the cushion.

Our response to the Good News of the Incarnation can be simply this: to go home tonight and fall asleep knowing and remembering that God is love. And that you are loved, held, forgiven, and watched over by the One who caused a baby to be born to show us the face of the God of hope.

And that is enough.