

Christmas Eve 2023  
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Christ Church, Exeter

### **Once Upon a Time in Bethlehem**

The classic story, especially those old folk tales read to children from the likes of Hans Christian Andersen and the Brothers Grimm, would often begin with the familiar: "Once Upon a Time."

Once upon a time in a land far, far away.

Once upon a time there lived in a certain village a little country girl. Her mother was excessively fond of her; and her grandmother doted on her still more. She had a little red riding hood made for her.

Or there was a king, or an ugly duckling, or a prince.

John's gospel, the gospel we will read tomorrow on Christmas Day (you're all invited: I'll save you some pews) would fit right at home: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then these few verses sum up the Christian faith: What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John 1:1-5

Every story needs a beginning.

Luke begins the story of the birth of Christ in a specific time and given place: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child." Luke 2

The rest we could probably fill in from memory of many Christmases past: the birth, the manger, the "no room in the inn," the shepherds, and the angel saying: "Do not be afraid; for see - 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."

I can't imagine celebrating Christmas without hearing and retelling the story.

And it's much more than a just good story, right? For those dare to belief, it points to and unlocks the heart of our faith. God became one of us so that we might believe that we too are made of what God is made of. This long-awaited messiah, imagined by the ancient prophets and anticipated by so many faithful, was and is the way, the truth, and the life. Our spiritual work is to spend our days and our lives trying to figure what that can mean for us. How, knowing this, it can give us hope through trying times, purpose if we ever feel that

we do not matter and are not needed any more, the ability to forgive when we've been hurt or betrayed, and love more freely without conditions.

Those "Once Upon a Time" fairy tales often ended with -- "and they lived happily ever after." So: is that the life you know? A straight line to joy and bliss? No interruptions? No trials or setbacks? We know that a whole lot can happen on the journey. That was the case in the life of the child whose birth we celebrate tonight.

It all began peaceful and serene enough: animals, the angels, and sheep around the manger in Bethlehem. But then plot moves quickly. Remember how Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus had to flee for their lives because King Herod was on a tear and the tradition tells of many innocent newborn babies were caught up in the violence. Notice how we leave those details out of the children's Christmas pageants. The peace that hovered over Bethlehem on that night did not last long. Does it ever?

Bethlehem is a real town. Recently I came across this headline: "There will be no Christmas lights in Bethlehem this year." Due to the ongoing war, Christian leaders and municipal authorities in the West Bank -- still home to many Christians -- decided to cancel all public festivities. For the first time since modern celebrations began, the birthplace of Jesus will not decorate the Manger Square tree." (Christianity Today).

There are few certainties and guarantees in life. Life happens. And in the beginning, there are many factors that can seem as random as unfair and unjust.

When and where were we born? Who were our parents? Were we born in Exeter Hospital or in a rural village miles away from any doctor who could be on hand if anything went wrong. Was the land of our birth at war, or experiencing drought, or enduring famine or seeing entire populations pick up and flee for their lives.

In the face of the best and worst of times, for me the way through is to be open to the mystery of what it means to believe. Hear again: What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John 1

Each one of us begins life the way Jesus did. We were pushed or pulled from warm safety out into the cold world to take our first shocking breath. We were probably wrapped up tight and swaddled. How does the story go? "you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger."

I can't tell you how many times I have watched the movie *The Sound of Music*, the 1965 classic film of the Van Trapp family fleeing Austria in the early years of WWII.

In the opening scene as the nuns in the Abbey were discussing and singing about how they are going to solve a problem like Maria -- the aspiring nun played by Julie Andrews -- the Reverend Mother listened with patience to the other's complaints. Maria was missing from abbey again, so one asked: should they put a cow bell around her neck? Should they look

for her in the barn because she loved animals. The Reverend Mother suggested that they look not in the usual places but in some place unusual. And when it seemed like Maria's future as a nun was over, again the Reverend Mother had the last word: "I always try to keep faith in my doubts." Enduring wisdom.

It is said that there are some animals that can walk within a few hours after their birth: a young horse foal, a piglet. A camel can take only 30 minutes to begin to walk.

Human babies? We are vulnerable beyond belief. We cannot survive alone. We are dependent on those who care for us and are impacted by the world around us.

One can say that in starting the story in a manger, God passed on the predicable and usual and opted for something else.

If the Christmas story is too hard to believe – the young Mary conceiving a child by the Holy Spirit, Joseph playing his part, the shepherds keeping watch, and the Wise Men who follow a star to bring gifts to the newborn child... then there can be room for a kind of doubt that still leaves room for believing.

What has been quoted many times in sermons in this church: the opposite of faith is not doubt. It is fear. The always provocative author Anne Lamott adds her take. She writes that the opposite of faith is certainty. "Certainty is missing the point entirely. Faith includes noticing the mess, the emptiness and discomfort, and letting it be there until some light returns." (Plan B: Further Thoughts on Faith)

Light is returning to the holy mess of this world.

Every story needs a beginning. This night is a gift, an offering, and a prayer.

Let me end tonight with the wisdom of the great civil rights and religious leader Howard Thurman:

When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone, when the kings and princes are home, when the shepherds are back with the flocks, then the work of Christmas begins: To find the lost, to heal those broken in spirit, to feed the hungry, to release the oppressed, to rebuild the nations, to bring peace among all peoples, to make a little music with the heart. And to radiate the Light of Christ, every day, in every way, in all that we do and in all that we say. Then the work of Christmas begins.