

## CHRISTMAS EVE HOMILY

*A homily given by Larry R. Hayward on December 24, 2017, Christmas Eve, at 8:00 p.m. at Westminster Presbyterian Church in Alexandria, Virginia.*

Five days ago, in *The New York Times*, literary scholar Stephen Greenblatt, published an op-ed piece called “Why Holiday Stories Matter.”

He cited a recent study of the Agta, “a contemporary population of hunter-gatherers in the Philippines.” The study explored the question of “how humans learn cooperative behavior, such as food-sharing, the care of others...[and] the acceptance of social norms.” It found that individuals [among the Agta] who live in camps with a *greater proportion of skilled storytellers* cooperate more readily with one another and are therefore more successful in gathering food.

Greenblatt goes on to say that the stories we tell during holiday seasons, particularly Christmas, *matter*, because they lead us to greater human cooperation, deeper unity, stronger understanding of one another. He writes:

This season, even in a bitterly contentious time, the storyteller has once again done the key work of fashioning cooperation among us. The Agta are clearly right.<sup>1</sup>

### I.

As we have moved through this season, we have likely heard or shared – once again – the stories we first encountered as children: Ebenezer Scrooge, the Nutcracker Prince, Santa Claus. If you are like me, you have watched, in recent weeks, once again, *Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street* and *It’s a Wonderful Life*.

On a more serious note, if you believe yourself to be agnostic, if you are searching for faith, if you are deeply committed to your faith, or if you are here tonight out of loyalty to someone you love, my hunch is that part of the draw here is the story you know you will hear.

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.<sup>2</sup>*

*While they were there, the time came for her to be delivered.<sup>3</sup>*

*She gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.<sup>4</sup>*

*Be not afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.<sup>5</sup>*

*And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!’<sup>6</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Greenblatt, “Why Holiday Stories Matter,” *The New York Times* 12/20/17.

<sup>2</sup> Luke 2:1 RSV.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 2:6 RSV.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:7 RSV.

<sup>5</sup> Luke 2:10-11 RSV.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:13-14.

Though the translation we know may differ from the older translation I have read, the story itself is imbedded in our hearts and minds.

## II.

In stories we draw from our culture, what often attracts us is a quest for human unity such as that found among the Agtas.

- We smile warmly when Macy's and Gimbel's set aside their commercial competition for the sake of their customers at Christmas.
- Our hearts are warmed when George Bailey is rescued from despair by an angel named Clarence, who is trying to earn his wings, and who takes George on a tour of what his beloved Bedford Falls would be like had he not been born and lived in it all these years. When George sees that his hometown would be torn apart by class conflict, economic differences, social ills and addictions, that his brother would not be living to become a war hero and the pharmacist he had worked for as a teenager would be in jail for his misfiled prescription George had discovered before delivering it to a child in town, George realizes that his has been and is a wonderful life.

Likewise, though the stories that Christian churches across the world recite, sing, and tell this night are about a particular birth of a particular person in the midst of a particular people at a particular time and place in history – namely, Jesus Christ, born as a free, Jewish male, in first century Palestine – the *significance* of his birth transcends the *time* and *place* and *gender* and race and legal standing and *national heritage* in which he was born. The peace Christ brings transcends these all.

Yet though Christ was born to bring peace, his birth results in immediate opposition and conflict. The Jewish governor Herod, appointed by the dominant Roman authorities to keep his fellow Jews quiet enough not to make trouble for Rome, sees threat when wise men from the East show up seeking “*the King of the Jews.*”

Like Pharaoh before him, Herod orders the killing of all children two years old and under, a fate from which Jesus' parents save him by fleeing to Egypt, much as Moses was saved by his flight into Egypt as well<sup>7</sup> and Israel earlier was saved by Joseph's sojourn there.<sup>8</sup>

While Christ was born to bring *peace*, he grew up to say:

Do not think that I have come to bring peace...but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person's enemies will be those of his own household.<sup>9</sup>

While Christ was born to bring peace, he was put to death by pragmatic political cooperation between religious and political authorities, each of whom felt their interests would be better served by his being out of the picture.

Despite this conflict and opposition surrounding his public ministry, Christ sowed seeds of unity and reconciliation which his birth inaugurated and which his return will someday bring to fullness.

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 2.

<sup>8</sup> Genesis 38-50.

<sup>9</sup> Matthew 10:34-36.

- He taught people to turn the other cheek, to go the second mile, to give cloak as well as coat when asked.<sup>10</sup>
- He allowed himself to stand corrected by a Syro-Phoenician woman who upbraided him for not allowing people from her nation and background to “eat [even] the crumbs” that fell from the table he prepared for “the lost sheep of the house of Israel,” the *initial* objects of his mission.<sup>11</sup>
- He drew to himself tax collectors and sinners, Pharisees and Roman soldiers, Samaritans, Jews, and Gentiles.
- From the cross he forgave a thief and promised him paradise; and concerning those responsible for his execution, he prayed, in the final moments of his life, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”<sup>12</sup>

All this Christ did and taught in the name of the community and reconciliation he sought.

Now to be sure, the peace on earth Christ brought was an *inauguration*, not a *coronation*; a *beginning*, not a final *consummation*. Sometimes in our frustration with the absence of peace in our lives and in our world, in our families and in our politics, we dismiss Christ of anger, disappointment, or a sense that he doesn’t have much power to make things better. And in some ways he doesn’t, or at least he chooses not to exercise that power, but perhaps it is because he leaves it up to us to be the bearers and bringers of peace in his name. He promises to return, but doesn’t tell us the time or the place,<sup>13</sup> and in over 2000 years, he has not yet exercised that option.

In the meantime, he has given us plenty of examples, and ample promise of his presence, for us to seek and work toward the unity to which he points and which he exemplifies.

- “Suffer the little children...to come unto me.”<sup>14</sup>
- “Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today.”<sup>15</sup>
- “Those who live by the sword will die by the sword.”<sup>16</sup>

There are countless instances in the life of this first century free Jewish male born in Palestine that form the stories can shape us today, if we but let them, in 21<sup>st</sup> century Alexandria, Arlington, Fairfax County, Washington, D.C., Virginia, the United States, and the world. It matters not that he was born 2000 years ago. It matters not that we know not when he will return. What matters is *who* he was, *what* he did, *what* he calls us to be and do. It is a call that we can answer.

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In 1995 a woman in the church I was serving at the time was diagnosed with ovarian cancer a few years after the comedian Gilda Radner died of the same illness at about the same age.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 5:38-42.

<sup>11</sup> Matthew 15:21-28.

<sup>12</sup> Luke 23:32-39.

<sup>13</sup> See for example Matthew 24:36, 24:42, 25:13.

<sup>14</sup> Matthew 9:14.

<sup>15</sup> Luke 19:5.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 26:52.

She had immediate surgery but a few minutes into the surgery the surgeons determined there was little they could do. Veteran surgical nurses who knew her socially were reported to have broken down in tears.

She was one of several people in the congregation who were facing tragedy at the time. One Sunday, something was said in worship that led her to go home and call her brother who lived in another part of the state.

It seems that she and her brother had been estranged for many years, and that he had been estranged from their mother as well, after he had left a first wife his mother and sister admired for a second wife they didn't.

"If I don't have long to live," she said on the call, "I don't want to die estranged from you."

They met at a diner halfway between their two towns. They talked for several hours. They called their mother and drove a ways to see her. A few years later, as their mother lay dying, the two were with her, brother and sister, family, at her bedside.

The woman and her brother, are still alive today...alive and reconciled.

### III.

I need not tell you that peace on earth is not fully present to us. It will not come in its fullness until that day when Christ brings a new heaven and new earth and wipes away all tears from our eyes.<sup>17</sup> But in the meantime, his peace is "at hand," though not "in hand."<sup>18</sup> It is near enough to make our seeking of peace an appropriate response to his birth and presence.

Peace on earth is something for which we can pray. It is something for which we can live and work:

- In our closest relationships
- In our marriages and families
- In our schools and churches and places of work
- In *our* nation and among *all* the nations of the world.

We are not able to bring or experience it, but in the times we do, it is a *miracle*, whether on 34<sup>th</sup> street or our street. When we experience the peace Christ brings, we are reminded, once again, that ours is a *wonderful life*.

Amen.

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<sup>17</sup> Revelation 21.

<sup>18</sup> This distinction is made by my teacher and friend, theologian Christopher Morse, who says "we are called to be on hand for that which is at hand but not in hand."