

“The Story”

Introduction

Thank you, Anna, for reading of the angel Gabriel’s appearance to Mary to tell her she would give birth to the very Son of God. Thank you, Nancy Carol, for reading Mary’s response, the Magnificat, Mary’s version of the Christmas story. And who could tell the Story better than Mary?

Hers is a story about triumph over the human condition. The God, who has been high and removed, separated from us with no involvement in the struggles of our condition, is reaching down, and through the sending of a baby, lifting us up.

Even if you do not know much about Christianity, or church or the Bible, I am fairly certain you know the Story of Christmas. It is a Story repeated for over two thousand years. It is a Story told in art and music, in novels and movies, in Christmas pageants and nativity scenes.

“Take your children to church on Christmas Eve,” the article on the internet said, “so that the Story they have seen and heard, perhaps even acted out, feels more ‘real’ when they hear it told in a sanctuary on Christmas Eve. Take them to a service in a sanctuary filled with worshippers so they will see that this Story is more than just their family’s story. That they are part of a huge family of families who celebrate the birth of our Lord.

So this morning and this evening, we are telling the Story. This morning is part one, the annunciation, the announcement or foretelling of the birth of the Son of God. This evening is part two, Luke 2, the narrative of the birth of our Lord. We are telling the Story in scripture, liturgy, song, prayers, and dance. And we are telling the story through our stories.

I

I am leaving this service today to drive to First Presbyterian Church, Greenville, North Carolina, for my husband’s last services there. Today is his birthday, and he is retiring. Our children and grandchildren will all be there. Our daughter-in-law is playing cello. Our granddaughter is playing French horn. Our daughter is playing hand bells. I will be helping lead the evening services. And we all will be lighting Advent candles. We are gathering for a special telling of the Story.

When our children were living at home and my husband and I were serving in different ministries, we did not often all end up in the same church at the same time. The one night we all tried to show up together was Bill’s birthday, Christmas Eve.

Two of our three children are introverts and do not like being in front of groups. The other child has mental disabilities, autism, and epilepsy and does not handle crowds well. Yet, on Christmas Eve, all three were troopers. Susan and Kres played their musical instruments, they divided the speaking parts, they lit the Advent candles, and they watched after their brother, Will.

I remember the year Will got away from them. They were sitting in the back with him, and he climbed down on the floor and starting crawling under the pews to the front. We could not get to him, but we could tell where he was by the jumping of worshippers as he crawled over their feet.

I remember the year Will learned to blow out candles, including the candles in the Advent Wreath. Picture the other four of us, closing in around the wreath, talking quickly, lighting and re-lighting, racing against Will's best efforts at blowing. The Light had come into the world, and we were doing our best to keep Will from extinguishing it.

I remember the year it snowed on Christmas Eve, and my husband decided that it would be a great idea at the end of the service to have the worshippers carry their candles outside to the nativity scene in the yard and place them lit in the snow around the scene. It was a beautiful way to witness to the community that the Light had come into the world. Only about an hour after we got home from the service, the fire department called to say the nativity scene was on fire.

And then I remember the year we were living in a church-owned house right beside the sanctuary where my husband was serving. And just as the kids and I were walking out of the house to go to the Christmas Eve service, Will went into a massive seizure. We had a protocol in those days that if a seizure lasted over eight minutes, the nurse at his group home would give him a shot of Ativan. And if the nurse was not available, staff members were to call 911.

Only we were not at the group home, there was no nurse with a shot, and I knew I could not call 911. You see in that little town with volunteer emergency response, the siren on the station in the block on the other side of the church would have started piercing the air. Pagers would have activated on about ten individuals in the church service. They would have rushed out of the service, and in a few moments EMS, fire trucks, and patrol cars would have emptied out of the station, sirens blasting as they came down the street and encircled the manse.

"God, please make him stop," I prayed. "We cannot disrupt the service. It is Christmas Eve." The seizing did stop at about seven minutes. And Will went to sleep, and there was no EMS call.

And next door our other two children lit the Advent candles. And the bell choir played a lullaby. And the soloist sang "O Holy Night." And the elders shared the communion elements. And the people sang "Silent Night" as the light was passed. And the Story of Christmas was told, uninterrupted.

No matter what else happens, no matter what circumstances we are experiencing, on this day we stop for the Story to be told. To a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph. To Elizabeth and Zechariah when Mary goes to their home. To lowly shepherds out in a field watching their flocks during the night and surprised by angels. To magi in the east who look up and see a new star. The remarkable Story is told. God is coming into our world to become one with us.

Conclusion

One last story about the Story. It was the first year after our daughter was married. She and her husband were serving as mission volunteers in Wilmington, Delaware. It was a tough assignment. Housing was in the inner city, and our daughter had to walk through the run-down neighborhood to the homeless shelter where she worked. Both their car and their apartment were broken into, robbed, vandalized.

Added to that, the street-smart women at the shelter seemed to enjoy giving a hard time to the southern-talking college honors grad whose job was to enforce house rules and go through their belongings to check for weapons and drugs.

Needless to say, my husband and I did not sleep well that year.

December came, and as the newest worker at the shelter, our daughter drew Christmas Eve duty. Travel home for the holidays would have to wait, and for the first time, our family was separated for Christmas.

That year when my husband, I, and the boys stood to light candles, our minds were on a loved one, spending the night in a homeless shelter in a cold city far away. That year we saw the holy family in a new light, far away from their families, wandering the streets, looking for shelter.

And we remembered Mary's words, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices. For God has looked with favor on the lowliness of this servant. God has lifted up the lowly; God has filled the hungry with good things."

And we understood the Story a little better. That this is the Story of Immanuel, God with us, lifting us up, wherever we are, whatever our circumstances.

This Christmas, wherever you are, whatever your circumstances, may the Story be real for you. May you experience God with you. Amen.