

Christmas Eve, 2010

Late Service

How familiar the story, the carols, the candlelight and how comforting they are; we are as wrapped in memories and images as Jesus was wrapped in swaddling clothes and we don't want anything to change. Woe be it to the one who forgets what mustn't change – the menu for the meal, the right ornament or display, the favourite song, what house, when and who are present. It is important to us that we feel comforted and hopeful. For some we return to the Christmases of our youth which we have enshrined; for others it is a return to our own childhood if not to the childhood of Jesus unless we know the smells of barns and animal breaths, dark nights full of threats and danger.

Perhaps we love to hear the Messiah or even sing along – our partners have placed the CD in the car or hum a song that is their favourite, every day! We love the texts from the gospel of Luke, all its characters and all its drama. We look for the baby in the manger, familiar faces gathered and those who arrive as strangers, friends of God we have yet to meet. But we don't want Christmas to change, ever, says Steven Charlston, former dean and president of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Ma. How many of you would agree with that?

And yet, he reminds us of the bell of irony, for at the nativity, the feast of the Incarnation, we are in fact, celebrating the great moment of change in human history, a moment where nothing is ever the same, if we understand what faith proclaims.

From an article in Thursday's Globe and Mail, from my own experience with a family gathered for a funeral this past week, from stories and information gathered from conversations and emails this week, many experience change most painfully at Christmas. We are met by other realities not of our choosing. We are required by circumstance to adjust, to release, to accept what has changed. Maybe we are alone or lonely in the midst of others; maybe our efforts to make it all right have failed. We cannot call back death or hard words or our inner Grinch; we are simply not that powerful. Some of us cannot erase the memories of 'that' Christmas, the one which seared us and hardened our hearts to holiday bliss.

We too live in a time of taxes, worries, fear - just like those who journeyed into a new reality. The manger of Bethlehem saw changes too; a new birthing place, new messages, some of them as strange as the ones who brought them, those in power on bended knee and those without power sung to by angels. This is what comforts us; this is the gospel, the good news announced to us in these days. Weary like Mary and Joseph we are longing to learn how to shape the new meaning in new realities even when it is on the edge of comfort and joy. That moment we like to fix as unchanging was full of movement. We need to figure out if we will let God awaken a change in us.

Perhaps we can make a resolution or pray to help us find our way:

"I will not quench the Spirit with fruitcake and cookies, mistletoe and presents, parties and poinsettias, firelight and pine. I will not quench the Spirit with eggnog and memories, tinsel and wrapping, Amahl and O'Henry, Nutcracker and Scrooge. I will not quench the Spirit with greeting cards and wassail,

reindeer and Bing Crosby, snowfall and sleigh rides, solstice and dark. I will not quench the Spirit even with Advent wreath, manger words, angel song, even with pageants and Magi-stars, with the running of shepherds, and the fearful hopes of all the years, even with carolling in nursing homes and toys given to children who are poor, even with Christmas Eve midnight, candleshine and prayer. I will not quench the Spirit – I will be still in the presence of birth.” (Miren Tirabassi).

The Spirit of God is God’s movement in the world and in us; we can be a part of what God is doing in a world that continues to change. We cannot hold any Christmas time as an idol or fear that when the things we do in church or the things the church does in the world are different. For Christians, beyond tonight and tomorrow, the other days of the year are about what God brings that is new. We are always in the presence of what God is bringing to birth.

But tomorrow is a new day; tonight we want our comfort and that is okay; we should take what we need for our journey. Sentimental is fine; tradition is good. This night is time out of time, Kairos, when we are open to hear a gospel meant for us.

In those days when Elizabeth was still the queen and Stephen Harper was prime minister and Dalton McGuinty the premier, when Jim Watson was mayor of Ottawa and Fred Hiltz the primate of the Anglican Church of Canada, in those days the word of God came to those gathered at night around a manger, candles in hand and singing carols on BelAir Drive; they heard again a word that settled their hearts and minds. There is good news of great joy for all the peoples. To YOU is born this day a Saviour who is the Messiah of God.

This is the message that does not change – for God so loved the world that Jesus was born in our neighbourhood. Not just a tradition but for many a reality. Amen+

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