

“Christmas Time is Story Time”

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Luke 2:1-20, Genesis 1:1-5, John 1:1-5, Matthew 1:18-25

I had a chance to visit Bethlehem last winter. When I travelled through the lands that our faith call holy, there was seldom a time where I wasn't overcome with a sense of wonder and awe as I remembered the stories of Scripture associated with each place. No more so I think, then when I found myself in Bethlehem. In spite of the animosity between the Palestinians and the Israelis, in spite of the soldiers that patrol the square outside the Church of the Nativity, in spite of the line-ups, when you finally arrive at the place of the Nativity and you see where Jesus is believed to have been born and where the manger was one cannot help be moved. When one travels through Israel and Palestine, there are many places where things are "believed" to have happened but they may not be the exact location.

Bethlehem however, is different. You are definitely in the ball park when you find yourself in this place. It really isn't much to look at, just a couple of holes in the ground where you can reach in and touch the earth. But there are so many individuals around you who are doing the same thing, who are sharing the same experience and remembering the same stories of faith. These are stories you know you share in common even though you don't these people. They bring you together just as the Christmas story brings us together tonight in this sacred place. Christmas time is story time.

Is there any other time of year that can conjure up old memories, legends and stories like Christmas?

I'm not quite sure why this is the case, but there are many of us who will spend some time with friends and family over the next few days, be it at the dinner table or sitting around sipping on your egg nog or your cranberry cocktail and someone will inevitably pipe up and say, "Remember the Christmas when?"

Remember the Christmas when we all got new skates and skis and there was no ice or snow?

Remember the Christmas when we all drove to Grandma's and Grandpa's and the weather was so bad it took all day to get there?

Remember the Christmas when there were a lot of children in the Sunday school who wanted to be the Magi in the pageant so we ended up with 5 wise men instead of the usual 3?

Remember the Christmas when the electricity went out and we cooked omelets and fried up some turkey bacon on the Coleman stove?

Remember the Christmas when Dad was in the hospital with the broken leg and we all went over and gathered around his bed and sang Christmas carols and snuck him some rum pudding?

Remember the Christmas all your cousins came over and we slept on the family room floor?

Remember the Christmas when we sang "While Shepherds Washed Their Socks By Night" in church? (By the way that's not one of the carols tonight in case you have any ideas!)

Remember when nobody noticed the oven had shut off and we ended up having Christmas dinner at 10pm after the turkey was finally done?

Remember the Christmas when the cat ate the ribbon off one of the gifts under the tree and we had to take it to the vet for emergency surgery?

Remember the Christmas when that Christmas bonus didn't come through and you didn't have everything you wanted but you still managed to have a merry Christmas anyways? That was one of the most memorable Christmases ever.

We all have our Christmas stories. We all have our tales from Christmases past. We have the stories we want to share and the stories that we'd just as soon forget. That's the thing about this time of year is that we can put so much pressure on having a Merry Christmas or a Happy Holiday it doesn't take much to ruin it and make it otherwise. But sometimes it may be the Christmas where everything seems to go wrong that we find the most authentic of our Christmas experiences. Those are the times where we discover the Christ child most firmly in our midst.

I know I can think of Christmases past that I would like to forget, but I know that I shouldn't. It's good to remember and recall those days, those moments when Christmas was

something less than perfect, something other than a fairy tale or a storybook legend. They are our Christmas stories too.

Like the Christmas when Dad lost his job. Or the Christmas when all everyone did was fight. Or the Christmas when the police showed up at your door. We have good reasons to want to forget these things. But sometimes remembering those adversities that we faced actually give our stories more importance and make our lives more valuable.

I don't know if you ever watch any of those antique shows that are now on TV. It started out with Antiques Road Show, but now you've got Canadian Pickers and American Pickers, and the pawn shop ones. One of the words that you hear used a lot on those shows is the word "patina."

The patina refers to the wear, the tarnish, or the sheen that is produced over time on an item. On what could be a metal, porcelain or wooden surface. Collectors love things with a "patina" because it adds value to them. The patina is evidence of a story and becomes a part of the story. They may not look or appear perfect but that's not the point. So remember that when you're counting your gray hairs, your worry lines and your wrinkles or even your pimples. it's just your patina! When you think of those rough years and Christmases you want to forget? lit just your patina. As I say, the years we live will always give way to evidence of faith -evidence of perseverance in spite of the adversity.

The stories of scripture including the Christmas stories have a patina. They are stories of adversity overcome. Christmas stories that we hear in the Bible start out in familiar ways. We hear words like, "In the beginning," and "In those days." They can sound like fairy tales, like "once upon a times" when everything was shiny and new and perfect. But can you imagine Mary and Joseph and the wise men and the shepherds and Jesus getting together years later to talk about the events of when he was born?

Maybe they would say, "Remember the Christmas when Mary gave birth to a son and Joseph wasn't the father?"

Remember the Christmas Joseph found out Mary was pregnant and he was going to dump her?

Remember the Christmas of the census when we had to walk 80miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to be registered to pay taxes?

Remember the Christmas Herod decided to kill all the children under two because he felt threatened?

Or the Magi saying, “remember the Christmas we went to Bethlehem to see Jesus and then had to take the long way home in order to avoid Herod?”

Or the shepherds saying, “remember that Christmas we were out in our fields and the Messenger from God appeared out of nowhere and we were terrified?”

Remember the Christmas when even though Mary was pregnant they told her she couldn't sleep indoors and she had to stay out with the animals?

Remember the Christmas Jesus had to sleep in a feeding trough and it was so dark in the middle of the night?

But let us not forget, these Scripture stories are stories about faith. These are stories about a faith that is shared. These are stories about our faith. These are stories about adversity overcome for the sake of us and for the sake of others. There is more to those Christmas stories. Things like,

Remember the Christmas when the Shepherds overcame their fear and risked leaving their flocks in the fields at night so they could be the first ones to see the newborn Jesus?

Remember the Christmas when Joseph found out Mary was pregnant and stuck with her and protected her and Jesus?

Remember the Christmas when after Mary found out she was unwed and pregnant that she remained faithful and gave birth to the Son of God?

Remember the Christmas those Magi showed up out of nowhere and provided us with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh that helped us pay for the trip to Egypt and escape Herod's wrath?

Remember the Christmas when the night sky was lit up by that bright star and it actually gave some light to the stable where Jesus was born?

You see the story of Christmas is not a fairy tale or a fable. The story of Jesus' birth is about Incarnation. It's about God with us. The Incarnation means God enters into this world of

ours as a human being and steps in up to God's hips in the messy, mundane, miserable and miraculous moments that make up every human being's real life. It's a story of faith and what that faith brings to human life.

In early America, the Native Americans, when presented with "legal" documents that said the white man now "owned" the land, had this simple response: "If this is your land, tell me your stories."

Christmas asks the same question: If this is your belief, if Christianity is your faith, what are your stories?

The story that begins with,

"Remember the year we all got the same thing for Christmas?"

"Remember the time when the whole world was given a Saviour?"

"Remember the Christmas Jesus was born in Bethlehem?"

Thanks be to God.