

Can You Believe It?

Having folks accept what happened Christmas Day has always been an uphill battle.

After all, did you listen to the story Luke tells us tonight, and did you pay attention to the cast of characters, and do you buy it, any of it?

After all, it's quite a leap to believe in a God who sends the message that God has become a human being (already something you might take seriously only if you're first well juiced on something stronger than V-8), and he makes this announcement not through the fine and upright religious folks of the day, but through shepherds, for Pete's sake, today's equivalent of International Refuse Workers or the Hell's Angels.

Make no mistake, while we have gussied up the whole shepherd scene with soft lights and sentimental music, in those days, shepherds were fully immersed in the animal husbandry business (and yes, some got caught at it)!

When shepherds come to town, grown men run for cover, and mothers grab their children off the street.

They were rough, unpolished, and often crude.

Yet it is to them, not to the Pope, not to the Archbishop of Canterbury, but to these guys whom God chooses to break the news that on this night, without our invitation, without our say so, and without our permission, God comes to us as an infant child.

And I ask you again, can you believe it?

The Son of God, born in a barn, and the only fanfare comes from old Joseph, teenage Mary, the riffraff shepherds, and three illegal aliens known to us as the Magi.

You'd think if God wanted his presence known on earth, he would have been born in Times Square or Hollywood, not in some meaningless corner of an Empire long gone.

And so the Christmas story has always been a hard sell, and perhaps that explains nearly 2000 years of humanity trying to make Christmas into something it isn't - because what it is, is, well, just so hard to swallow, and if you buy it, you are forever changed, and face it, most of us hate change.

So for two thousand years we have eagerly chipped away at the truth of Christmas - that the Mystery of all that is will stop at nothing, will stoop lower than low, to have us - to have us all.

But this truth of Christmas is now so diluted that it's now reported that 40% of the US population says Christmas is nothing more than a civic holiday with absolutely no connection to matters of faith.

I read yesterday that even 20% of Jewish families have a Christmas tree in their homes, and need I remind you of the millions of Christmas albums sold by such well known Christians as Neil Diamond and Barbra Streisand?

(For you younger folks, they are both famously Jewish singers from a past generation).

And so here we are tonight, and I ask you, can you believe it?

We are so used to separating our faith life from our so-called real life.

And so on Sundays we pray for peace and a forgiving heart, but so often on Mondays through Saturdays, we swim with the sharks - because in a dog eat dog world, you better know how to bite!

But the fantasy that we can separate the spiritual life from daily life, the myth that the spiritual and the physical occupy different spaces, different places, is exploded, all because of the infant child born to us this night.

God becomes a human being.

A diaper soiling, belly hungry child who will grow into a man who loves and weeps and heals and scolds; and yes, who dies a criminal's death and is raised again on the third day.

We call it the incarnation.

And in the incarnation, the truth that has always been true, that the spiritual and the physical are fused, that the spiritual and the physical are one, today, now, in the workaday, family-centered, exhausted, sometimes happy, sometimes frustrated- beyond-all-reckoning-lives that we each of us live, these lives of ours, in their holiness and in their pettiness, in their honor and in their lies and manipulations, these real, messy, functional and dysfunctional lives that we each of us live - each and every day - are suffused and infused and yes, even bemused, with the holy spirit of God!

God comes to those rascal shepherds instead of popes and kings in order to say to us, there is nothing you can do or say or be that will separate you from my love.

There is no where you can go and no where you can hide that will separate you from my love.

For you see, the truth of our circumstance is not that we invite God to live in our hearts, but that each and every one of us live in the heart of God - now, today, and forever.

Can you believe it?

Tonight, much like Easter Sunday, many will venture into these pews, pews that are otherwise unfamiliar most of the rest of the year.

Perhaps the reason you come is entirely personal, entirely different from the reason that brings your pew mate.

Perhaps you fear that in the week in, and week out of worship, the church may not meet your expectations or fill what you feel you may need.

Perhaps you fear you have sinned, or are unworthy, or are simply worried that your life is somehow less than holy, that this is not the place for you.

Yet this night, you are here.

Or perhaps you feel none of these things.

Perhaps your life is a good one.

Your self-esteem is intact.

You have few if any regrets.

Yet this night, here you are.

And this night, as we remember to whom and how God chooses to come among us, whether or not you lay judgments upon yourself, whether or not you have fears that may be eating at your soul, whether or not you hold doubts in your heart; it can all be brought as an offering here; and laid at the feet of the child; this child who comes to make all things new.

I know it is a challenge to say that.

I know that it is a challenge to hear it.

The child has made all things new?

Not really.

Not if you just look around.

Wars continue to rage in Syria, The Central African Republic and Afghanistan, among many other places.

Our political discourse still can't seem to rise above the level of a shout or a sneer.

Wages for so many are stagnant, the upward mobility so many thought was a sure thing has disappeared, our poor increase in numbers and in misery.

Why make the claim that all things are new?

We are not the first to ask this question.

Probably, we will not be the last.

And yet, no matter your circumstances, no matter your pain, no matter your success, your true identity, if you can only bring yourself to believe it, is that of a child of God.

And even more, you are a beloved child of God.

Beloved by the child that God himself becomes.

Beloved by a God who knows from bitter experience every form of human difficulty, yet who promises NOT to rescue us from danger, but to be with us always, in the midst of every danger.

Perhaps it is to be reminded of that unalterable fact; perhaps that is why you are here tonight.

This holy night, as we celebrate God becoming one of us, we are invited to remember that we are each of us made in the image of God.

"It's been said that if we really knew how to see with the eyes of the soul, we would see angels going before every person we meet, announcing: "Make way for the image of God! Make way for the image of God!" Long, Testimony, 46.

This night, God says to the whole world,

"You are accepted.

Whether you're riding high with the Hell's Angels or whether you're a nine-time divorcé; whether you're an uptight businessman or whether you're just lost and confused; whether you're rich and content or out of your mind with neurosis -- you are accepted.

You are accepted by that which is greater than you, the name of which you may not know.

Don't worry about the name for now; you may find it later.

Don't try to do anything now; later, perhaps, you may do much.

Tonight, don't seek for anything; don't intend anything.

Tonight, simply accept the fact that you are accepted." Paul Tillich (paraphrased).

Through this child, by the grace of God, all of humanity is home free, even you, even me.

The desert blooms, the virgin gives birth, and you, my friends, are accepted.

Can you believe it?

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