

“Embracing the mystery of Christmas”

December 19, 2010

Text: Isaiah 7:10-16, Matthew 1:18-25

I.

There’s a mystery to Christmas that draws us in. Undeniable, don’t you think?

In the film, *Love Actually*, which came out around seven years ago ... (Do you remember? It featured an impressive cast: Hugh Grant, Keira Knightly, Emma Thompson, Liam Neeson and Colin Firth) ... much of the film took place on the days before Christmas where, it seemed, everybody—because it was Christmas and you’re supposed to tell the truth at Christmas ...

- Everybody was declaring their love to their beloved.
- Proposals of marriage were everywhere ...

It was a totally *feel good* sort of film. And part of what was implied in the film is that Christmas has this power to evoke love. And it does, doesn’t it? And part of the mystery of Christmas is that it does that.

But what’s going on here? What’s it all about?

Isn’t it about us wanting so much for God to come so we can be reassured that God is real and that God’s love is real—the love that we want so desperately to embrace, to feel and to make our own?

Hey, we’re human ... and sometimes it gets a little lonely on this spinning planet. Sometimes we want more information than is possible about who we are, who we belong to and where we are going. Sometimes, we long to see the face of God in the high hope that all our worries and anxieties will be laid to rest.

II.

Christmas is a mystery, to be sure ... but it’s a mystery woven into a story, with tremendous power to transform lives.

The nativity stories of the Bible are so utterly human ... and because we’ve been retelling them over such a span of centuries, they’ve become ingrained into the fabric of our culture and our identity. The stories are part of our lives, acquiring a stamp of the sacred along the way.

What grabs us immediately about Matthew’s nativity story is its bare-bones humanity. Mary is pregnant and they’re blaming it on the Holy Spirit.

We talk all the time about the importance of *context*. Taking Matthew's context seriously, think of the potential scandal that surrounds Joseph and Mary. Again, she's with child and they're not married. What's up with that?

The next thing we know, an *angel of the Lord* appears, explains things to Joseph and an immaculate birth is on the way. Ah, the mystery of the Incarnation!

And before we can blink, Joseph weds Mary, the child is born, they name him Jesus and he's going to save his people from their sins.

That's a lot to process in one gulp. Speaking to Joseph, the angel of the Lord says, *Mary will bear you a son, you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*

That's a quick connection between the holy birth at Bethlehem and sin. And part of the mystery of Christmas is how this happens.

III.

Why is it that we know at Christmas—like at no other time—that we're supposed to *be good and do good ... do the right thing*. We know ... don't we?

Country music star **Travis Tritt** spent many years, it turns out, playing in out-of-the-way beer joints before he made it big in the music industry. He reports that many of these joints were seriously dangerous places ... with drunken fans starting fights over the most trivial of things.

Tritt recalls how he found a unique way of keeping the peace when things turned ugly. Would you believe, CHRISTMAS MUSIC. Then he adds,

*Silent Night proved to be my all-time life-saver. Just when the bar fights started getting out of hand—when the bikers were reaching for their pool cues and the rednecks were heading for the gun rack, I'd start playing **SILENT NIGHT**.*

*Didn't matter what month it was; I didn't care at that point. **SILENT NIGHT**. I swear, he says, sometimes they'd just start crying ... listening to me play Silent Night.*

You see, the holy reveals our sin. It reminds us of who we ought to be, of who God in Christ calls us to be.

When the holy comes close, we know what God wants. And we know it's name is love ... and that it comes to us in mercy and patience ... grace and forgiveness, welcoming, sustaining, loving everybody—especially the little ones. WE KNOW!

IV.

The mystery of Christmas is linked to the mystery of *God is with us*, which Matthew alludes to ... and to the sign referred to in Isaiah 7 where, in our reading this morning, a power ploy is looming.

- It's the historical period of the *divided kingdom*, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south.
- And the King of Israel is conspiring with the King of Syria to tumble the King of Judah, with its capital in Jerusalem.
- Minor problem, according to the Bible: this is NOT part of God's plan.

And so the prophet Isaiah tries to persuade King Ahaz of Judah not to fear ... to stand strong ... for the evil designs of this alliance are doomed to failure.

However, King Ahaz is wavering. In an effort to convince him, Isaiah urges him to *ask for a sign* from God, that you'll be convinced. But he demurs. Finally, exasperated with him, God gives him a sign anyway, the sign of **Emmanuel**, that *God is with us*.

Look, says the prophet, *the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.*

It is the memory and the mystery of this *sign* that has lived on through the centuries as a symbol of hope and promise. The story of the birth of the Christ child picks up on the memory—the memory, woven into the *mystery* and *wonder* of eternity, that lives on through the passing generations.

Ah, the twin mysteries of Advent faith: the *mystery* of the God who comes to us ... and the *mystery* of our yearning for God to come.

Again, there's something about the mystery of Christmas love that draws us in. We can't help it. It transcends our capacity for explanation. In this sense, it's deeper than human intellect and understanding.

It's about the life-impulse of creation, the sacred gift of life itself. And it starts with the birth of a child, filled with all the mystery and wonder of the creation spark.

We write lofty poems about it. We sing engaging hymns about it. We move mountains to embrace it; but, still, we can never totally explain it.

V.

In one of Brete Harte's novels, there's a raucous mining town called **Roaring Camp** where—to the utter shock of everyone, one day—a baby is born. We're not told whether it was the month of December or not, but it might have been.

Roaring Camp was inhabited strictly by men; and they were a dirty, nasty group. Disputes were settled by gunfire ... and everything about **Roaring Camp** was filthy.

The baby was born to Cherokee Sally, who had drifted into town one day; but, sadly, she died giving birth. So, to these unruly, nasty, dirty men fell the task of caring for Sally's baby.

1. To begin with, they laid the baby in a shoebox with some rags in it ... and immediately realized that wouldn't do. And so a man was sent 80 miles on a mule to get a rosewood cradle, the best money could buy.
2. With the cradle in place, the rags obviously wouldn't do ... so another man was sent off to purchase the softest lace he could find.
3. With the baby neatly resting in the newly laced cradle, the men began to notice, with notable dismay, the filthy floor and the unsightly walls ... and soon they were scrubbed spotless and refurbished ... then the windows ... and soon, new curtains were bought.
4. Soon, when the usual needs of the baby emerged, the men found themselves radically cleaning up their language ... and soon they began shaving and cleaning the clothing, wanting to look respectable in the baby's presence.

In the mythical town of **Roaring Camp**, a baby is born ... and soon the whole town is transformed. The mystery of Christmas is like that. It has power to change us ... to break down barriers, to transcend impassés and chasms and the *irreconcilable*.

VI.

And so, we keep retelling the story and keep rediscovering ourselves in the retelling.

Embracing the mystery of Christmas—that God somehow comes to us through one of us.

This coming is a longing and yearning that has lived in the human spirit since time eternal. It's part of our humanity ... part of our *leaning forward on tiptoe* to embrace the divine ... to want some tangible bonding to the Creator of the universe; to want to be wrapped in the warmth of eternal love.

The verse of our Christmas hymns reminds us:

O come, O come, Emmanuel ... that mourns in lonely exile here ... until the child of God appear ...

Angels, from the realms of glory ... wing your flight o'er all the earth ... As you sing creation's story, now proclaim Messiah's birth ...

and wonders of God's love ... and wonders of God's love ... and wonders, wonders of God's love.

For Christ is born or Mary, and gathered all above ... while mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the glorious love of heaven.

May it be so!

All praise be unto God! Amen!

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