

## Christmas Eve 2005

For three or four years now we have had the Christmas pageant at five o'clock and the communion candle lighting service at nine. The two services are held in the same sanctuary, we sing some of the same songs, and many of the same scriptures are read. But the two services couldn't be more different.

At nine, we sing with the choir, celebrate communion, and pass the light of Christ.

At five, the kids dress up as Mary and Joseph and Caesar Augustus, sheep covered in white, and shepherds are dressed in bathrobes.

Going from the five o'clock service to the service at nine feels a bit like going from Kindergarten to the National Cathedral.

When the earlier service is finished we smile,  
give thanks  
and the director normally breathes a huge sigh of relief.

There is something that happens in the earlier service that is profound. In the midst of barnyard animals moving about the stage, one brother telling another brother: "You're not doing it right!" and a sheep that gets lost or decides she doesn't really want to be in the Christmas pageant and would rather sit with mom, we sing silent Night, Holy Night.

And it is profound because it reminds us of the reality of Christmas. A babe is born into chaos. Our setting now may be calm and tranquil and silent but that first Christmas God, enters the world as a Jewish child in a land ruled by others.

For six centuries the Jews have been scattered. First by the Babylonians, then the Assyrians, then the Greeks, and when Christ was born Romans, The Jews were a people torn and twisted in a hundred different directions. Trying to survive. Trying to maintain some sense of identity. Trying to live as a people called to be a blessing.

And into this world a babe is born.

To a child bride and a young man

What chance does a Jewish boy have in a world ruled by Romans?  
What chance does a carpenter's son have amidst the powerful?  
What promise does something born in Nazareth (that city of nothingness)  
have to be king?

There is something beautiful about those shepherds in bathrobes and angels  
with cardboard wings.

Three and four year olds, unspoiled by the world, become vessels of the  
holy.

And they proclaim with cardboard wings God's way at Christmas;  
God meets the rulers of the day with a childhood bride and a babe in a  
manger.

One of my professors used to talk about taking his children to New York at  
Christmas to go shopping.

He talked about walking along 42<sup>nd</sup> street with his two children, his most  
precious treasures.

He said at the time that 42<sup>nd</sup> street wasn't just a sign of New York at its  
worst.

It was New York at its worst.

Just a couple blocks from Broadway.

There amidst the prostitution and everything else for sale.

He said he got a picture of what it must have been like for God to have his  
child be born in Nazareth.

With his arms wrapped tight around his two most important treasures,  
he received a glimpse of what it must have been like to let his child be born  
in a world that was so divided.

With his arms wrapped around his kids,  
something else happened.

In the midst of prostitutes and drug dealers he noticed that the people he saw  
were somebody else's child.

He didn't loosen his grip on his kids, but he saw them in a different light.

They too were somebody's treasure.

And into 42<sup>nd</sup> street, he saw a street preacher, preaching, and he heard him  
yell:

“The Word is made flesh, and dwells among us, filled with grace and truth.”

I think the shepherds had something right on Christmas Eve so long ago.  
When they heard about what God was doing that Christmas day they  
responded with utter fear.

I think the little girl in the Christmas pageant who decided she would rather  
be with her mom than be in the Christmas story might have had been on to  
something.

I think my professor with arms around his kids had a sense of it too.  
What an incredible risk God took so long ago  
for the word to become flesh.

But to me perhaps the greatest miracle, the most stunning thing about  
Christmas is that God is still taking risks.  
God is still inviting you and me to be a part of the Christmas story.

In a world torn apart by fundamentalists,  
In a world of tsunamis and hurricanes,  
In a world of temptation and greed,  
God still yearns to be born.

God still wants to come alive.  
God still hopes to be received.  
Grace and truth still knock at the door.

How is the Christ child born again?  
Where does the spirit of truth find wings?  
Where is the babe born in the manger?

In every heart that receives him.  
In every mind that welcomes him.  
The treasure is born when the peace of Christ reigns in our hearts.  
The treasure is born when we love God and neighbor.  
The treasure is born when Christ’s peace illumines the darkness.

Maya Angelou may say it best.  
In “Amazing Peace,” she tells of this treasure born in the most unlikely  
circumstances.

She says:

Thunder rumbles in the mountain passes  
and lightning rattles the eaves of our houses.  
Flood waters await us in our avenues.

Snow falls upon snow, falls upon snow to avalanche  
over unprotected villages.  
The sky slips low and grey and threatening.

Into this climate of fear and apprehension, Christmas enters,  
Streaming lights of joy, ringing bells of hope  
and singing carols of forgiveness high up in the bright air.

The world is encouraged to come away from rancor,  
come the way of friendship.  
Hope is born again in the faces of children  
it rides on the shoulders of our aged as they walk into their sunsets.  
Hope spreads around the earth.

Brightening all things,  
even hate which crouches breeding in dark corridors.

In our joy, we think we hear a whisper.  
At first it is too soft. Then only half heard.  
We listen carefully as it gathers strength.  
We hear sweetness.  
The word is Peace.  
It is loud now. It is louder.  
Louder than the explosion of bombs.

We tremble at the sound. We are thrilled by its presence.  
It is what we have hungered for.  
Not just the absence of war. But, true Peace.  
A harmony of spirit,  
security for our beloveds and their beloveds.

We clap hands and welcome the Peace of Christmas.  
We beckon this good season to wait a while with us.  
It is Christmas time, a halting of hate time.

At this Holy Instant, we celebrate the Birth of Jesus Christ  
to celebrate the promise of Peace.

We, Angels and Mortal's, Believers and Non-Believers,  
Look heavenward and speak the word aloud.  
Peace. We look at our world and speak the word aloud.  
Peace. We look at each other, then into ourselves  
and we say without shyness or apology or hesitation.

Peace, My Brother.  
Peace, My Sister.  
Peace, My Soul.

Peace on this frightening night.  
Peace on this holy night.  
Amen