

Christmas Eve  
Wicker Park Lutheran Church  
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki  
December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2016

The month of December is often filled with deep nostalgia, from traditions of decorating trees, memories of loved ones gathered, and favorite songs that help us reflect and connect. During this month, we might also recall unpleasant memories. You see, that's the double-edged sword of nostalgia. In one breath, we can fondly remember a loved one while mourning their absence. Nostalgia is tricky like that.<sup>1</sup> With those thoughts and feelings we **gathered** tonight among dim lights, we heard the familiar Christmas story, and soon we will be sent singing "Silent Night," reminded that all is calm, and all is bright.

But, here's the thing, we have domesticated Christmas. I'm not talking only about commercialism and gifts, although that's part of it. What I am saying is that Christmas has been commandeered by one specific type of nostalgia, and with that imbalance, we've forgotten the power of Christmas. Now, there's nothing wrong with remembering a Norman Rockwell-style Christmas with the snow-covered ground, mounds of presents, carolers singing Silent Night, and a happy, nuclear, and heteronormative family gathered around a feast. The only thing is, that's not the biblical Christmas. That's a different memory all together or, perhaps, it's simply idealism.

Tonight's biblical memory began with a wide-angled lens. It began with an emperor and governor only to zoom in on something that neither a governor nor an emperor would have ever

---

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-nostalgia-makes-us-happy-and-healthy\\_us\\_5859bda4e4b04d7df167cb8d](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-nostalgia-makes-us-happy-and-healthy_us_5859bda4e4b04d7df167cb8d)

noticed. There, we heard of an unwed, teenage mother giving birth to a bastard child. She was in a stable, or probably a cave, because she was homeless for the night. She was homeless because the rulers who occupied her country made her travel so she could give these same ruthless rulers money. Although her occupied territory was generally peaceful, it was only peaceful because fear and terror kept it as such. Into all that, a young girl, named Mary, gave birth to her first-born son.<sup>2</sup> *That* is the Christmas story.

In this real Christmas story, there was no Santa; there was not a mention of gifts; Amazon didn't deliver a crib; there was no tree; and if that same story played out this very night we would probably call it a tragedy and not "Christmas" at all. However, *that story* is Christmas. *That* is the incarnation.

You see, our God enters into an imperfect and messed up world. As Nadia Boltz-Weber puts it, "Our God enters into the world as it actually exists, and not the world we often wish it would be." We sometimes act like we're trying to shelter God from reality. We behave as though God is only interested in loving a romanticized version of ourselves or an idealized version of our chaotic world, and so we put up a façade of our best selves.<sup>3</sup> The thing is, God can handle our true selves. Our God works with and in this disordered world, because it is the same world that little baby boy entered. The story of Jesus' birth isn't silent night, instead it is one of illegitimacy, homelessness, and political domination all on the brink of genocide. So too our worldwide story is one of illegitimacy, homelessness, political domination, and genocide.

So, why in the world do we want to re-create *this* story every year? I'm convinced that this year we especially need this story. After a year filled with the most divisive presidential race of our

---

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.davidlose.net/2016/12/christmas-eveday-a-christmas-beginnings/>

<sup>3</sup> Boltz-Weber, Nadia. *Accidental Saints: Finding God In All The Wrong People*. "The Slaughter of the Holy Innocents of Sandy Hook Elementary."

lives, never-ending wars in places like Syria and Iraq, weekly and sometimes daily terrorist attacks, water crises from the city of Flint to the indigenous people of the Dakotas, Brexit, police brutality, attacks on police, and the rise of xenophobia, tonight we need the *real* Christmas story. We need to be reminded that the mystery of the incarnation was found in the dark of night. We need to remember that Jesus was born into a disaster of the world, a world that looks a lot like ours. We don't need to hear it to then lament a world that never changes; rather, we need it so that our nostalgia might transform us.

And, nostalgia can be transformational. True, sometimes it can pathologically hold us in the past. However, when nostalgia is used in a healthy way, it can be like a shepherd's staff - that grounds us in the past while we figure out how to move forward. Nostalgia can buy us some emotional time because it roots us in the knowledge that we have gotten through this before and we can do it again.<sup>4</sup>

This is power of the real Christmas story. With it we're reminded that as God's people, "We've got this!" In the middle of all of the turmoil, uncertainty, and anxiety that life brings, we see God's presence in *that* moment. Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds found God in a difficult situation. They found God in their togetherness. // It's no wonder that people often become more nostalgic during the holidays. We find a sense of belonging in gathering during worship, in family and friends coming together, and in work parties. Togetherness is what we celebrate tonight as Christians.

But what does that look like for us today? Well, I've been captivated by a movement, of sorts. The movement often starts with an Arab, Muslim man in a densely populated area. He brings with him two weapons – a blindfold and a sign. One such sign read, "Hello, my name is Karim and I am an Arab-American. Like many people who are black, brown, women, LGBTQIA, Latinx,

---

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-nostalgia-makes-us-happy-and-healthy\\_us\\_5859bda4e4b04d7df167cb8d](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/why-nostalgia-makes-us-happy-and-healthy_us_5859bda4e4b04d7df167cb8d)

Muslim, Jewish, Immigrants, and others, I am very scared....but I have hope that I am safe with you. Together we can build a community of caring, rather than one of fear. You can trust me to care for you no matter who you are, what you look like, or where you are from. Will you embrace me as willingly as I embrace you? Will you shake my hand and/or hug me?” With that sign at his feet and the blindfold over his eyes, Karim vulnerably stands. Slowly people stop and read the sign. Some read it and walk away. But then, one person comes forward and shakes his hand. Another gives him a hug. Soon women, children, men, babies, people of every age and color are embracing this Muslim man on a busy New York street.<sup>5</sup>

Yes, Karim is Muslim, and Karim knows something about the Incarnation. Karim knows that words are *never* enough. As my one colleague puts it, “Words must be joined by gestures and deeds.” That is why our worship is full of bodily actions and involves all our sense. That is why the Word is made flesh for us in the meal at this table. That is why our baptism calls us to live an embodied faith in the world.

Friends, *this* is the memory of Christmas! “The good news of Christmas is that God embraces us in the midst of fear and uncertainty.”<sup>6</sup> Sure, we proclaim the Word of God; however, this Word takes flesh among us all. Here, in this time and place, we recognize God in black bodies, brown bodies, refugee bodies, transgender bodies, pregnant bodies, and frail bodies. We recognize God in the body of our neighbor, in the body of our enemy, and even in our own imperfect bodies.

So, there it is – we gather in this nostalgic moment to be transformed. Transformed by the incarnation of God in this community. Here, in this gathered body, tonight, we become reflections of God’s Incarnation. We can walk into difficult situations knowing that “we’ve got this” because

---

<sup>5</sup> <https://vimeo.com/193125533>

<sup>6</sup> <http://campaign.r20.constantcontact.com/render?m=1102316637680&ca=5067b367-87d8-44e5-b306-dfe1d4624b12>

our God is with us. On this night, I hope that you can be reminded that God is with you through the difficulties of life. I pray you recognize the power of God's incarnation in your body and the bodies of others. I yearn for you to remember that our God is always here, among us, in full, bodied form. Amen.