

Believing in the Dark
Revelation 5:1-8; 13-14
Luke 2:8-20

“And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.”

On the Sunday after Christmas, I am usually left to wonder whether any of us really arrived at the manger. Or maybe the better way to ask this, assuming by the crowd that many of us at least made it to worship on Christmas Eve, is to ask, “What part of yourself did you offer him at his cradle in the darkness of Christmas Eve?” In response to my own question, I found myself thinking of the selves we present to each other in this season by way of our Christmas cards. If my mailbox is any measure, the cards in vogue these days with Gen Xers and Millennials are cards that have pictures of the children or of the whole family taken during summer vacation on the front, a head shot of the family dog on the back, and a lovely design stamped on the envelope that has the family’s initial and a return address. My generation, on the other hand, and the generation preceding mine, still tends toward traditional cards, accompanied by a Christmas letter that outlines the various achievements of children and grandchildren, the notable accomplishments of a spouse, reports of trips to faraway places, and sometimes a preview of milestones in the year ahead. Obviously we older folks, who are not so much on Facebook, do this to stay in touch or to catch up with friends and family in general. But like Facebook, the story we tell of our lives is often a story polished up for public consumption, and told as though the world will be gladdened not only by news of Christ’s birth, but also by news of the cheerleading successes of our firstborn.

For the most part, I relish this news that’s fit to print, especially from friends I have not seen in years, and then, along with a week’s worth of New York Times, I put it all out to be recycled. There is, however, one Christmas letter I have kept in my sermon file for the last thirty years. It is a

Christmas letter from my Uncle Jack, typed on an actual typewriter and in a font that, like my uncle, has long since ceased to exist. The letter is headed,

Christmas: Bah! Humbug!

1. Anita, Alan's wife, flew back from Alaska with a possible brain tumor. 2. Jack's brother, Dr. Jay Welch, died in Houston--an unnecessary death due to incompetent physicians. 3. Uncle Frank Chesky died. 4. Dee Chesky fell victim to gall bladder surgery. 5. Vic Chesky was treated to the very popular triple coronary by-pass surgery. 6. Jane suffered the indignity of having a tumor removed from her colon. Following complete recovery from this, she fell and sustained a broken collar bone. 7. Not to be outdone, Jack was victimized by a slight coronary. While hospitalized for this, his physician discovered a mega aneurysm. 8. Jack was flown to Houston by air ambulance where they replaced three-quarters of his aorta. 9. Susan's divorce became final. 10. Our beloved lab "Sam" became quite ill with a liver disorder; he is now recovering. 11. All crops on all farms failed due to severe drought. 12. Jack is scheduled for open heart surgery in January.

My late uncle, who was a surgeon, a sometimes Presbyterian, a John Birch sympathizer, and a quick-witted cynic, surely wrote the letter to mock all the happy Christmas reports he had received over the years. But as I reread his letter this week, I thought to myself that Susan's divorce becoming final and Jane's broken collar bone and the crops failing and Jack's open heart surgery ahead had more to do with my coming to the manger than all the third daughters who made the dean's list or all the eldest sons whose football teams won the regional championships. What sends me to the manger are my failings; what propels me toward the Christ child are the peculiar human sorrows that will not be addressed by presents under the tree or a song in the air or my own true love showing up at the door. What finds me going even unto Bethlehem in the dark is my longing to see for myself and believe that the love that came down at Christmas came to me.

Why, then, in the days before Christmas, do I do everything I can do to avoid the darkness where faith becomes possible? As Clark Strand wrote in the New York Times on the Saturday before the Winter Solstice, "Darkness [is] the only power that has ever put the human agenda on hold." He goes on to say that as we have made it impossible to get away from invented light, we have forgotten what darkness is for. "In times past people took to their beds at nightfall, but not merely to sleep. They touched one another, told stories and, with so much night to work with, woke in the middle of it to a darkness so luxurious it teased visions from the mind and divine visitations that helped to guide their course through life." We instead fill the darkness before Christmas with our agenda. We shop; we bake; we decorate; we wrap. There are parties to attend, Christmas cards to send, packages to post before it is too late, relatives to take in. These are the things we do to make ready. And they are good things to do--things that bring us close to one another, things that give the heart joy, things that call out of us a deep gratitude for the gifts of friendship and family. But still, the time before Christmas appears to be in our hands. Even as we rush from store to store at three-thirty on Christmas Eve or are up until three-thirty on Christmas morning wrapping presents, it is all part of our effort to make Christmas day the day we want it to be.

It never is. Not because the presents cannot live up to expectations; not because the dressing never tastes as good as it did when we were children; not because the weather was too warm or the ones you love a little too cold; but because you and I cannot give one another Christmas. You and I cannot take away the darkness from one another's eyes; you and I cannot put flesh on the word we most need to hear; you and I do not even know what it is that we most desperately need; and, even if we did, it would likely be the very thing we do not have to give. We have readied ourselves for the holiday we had in mind rather than for the God who has come to dwell with us in Jesus Christ.

We are no different in these days than the Israelites were in those days. According to the

strange Book of Revelation, they awaited the coming of the Lion of Judah who would restore the nation and slay Israel's enemies. Instead, a slaughtered lamb appears. This is shorthand for the Savior who does not meet our expectations: a Savior who does not come when we want him to come, who does not enter in where we want him to enter in, whose coming does not depend on our socially acceptable readiness or our well-meaning piety or Christmas letters full of ourselves. In these days after the holiday, we have been given a Savior whose coming coincides with God's purposes, whose incarnation is infinitely beyond our grasp, and whose love is, even now, patiently awaiting our arrival per the angel's late night instructions.

What I invite you to believe in the dark on this Sunday after Christmas is that Christ comes to us, in the first place, not on the day we designate, but on the day when, beyond our knowing, we need him. He comes to us on the day when our divorce becomes final and when the cat's blood sugar goes up; when the crops fail and so too our spirits; when our wounds heal but our collarbone breaks; when our business goes under and our future seems foreclosed. Christ comes to us when our heart is not in our hand but in our throat and so in the grip of a winter whose winds will surely blow. He comes when a decree goes out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled and we find ourselves going down the road we least want to travel, unsure of the one by our side, uncertain whether there will be anyone to take us in when we arrive. Christ comes when the political situation is beyond our power to effect and when the conditions in the city have, once again, overwhelmed sweet charity; when peace is a fool's errand and when our reason to get up in the morning has escaped us. Christ comes when we are out in the field keeping watch over our flock and finding the darkness particularly hard to bear. Christ comes not on the day we designate, but in the night when we need him most. That is the first thing I invite you to believe in the dark on the Sunday after Christmas.

The second is this: Christ comes not always to the place we have prepared for him, but rather awaits us in the stable of our lives. “Down there Jesus Christ sets up quarters,” Karl Barth told us last Sunday. “There we need him, and there he can use each one of us. There we are ready for him.” Patty Thiel, a member of Nassau Church whom you met with her son Tommy on the video last Sunday, sent me Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s poem reminding me, in other words, of this same truth: “Christ climbed down/from His bare Tree this year/and softly stole away into/some anonymous Mary’s womb again/where in the darkest night of everybody’s anonymous soul/He awaits again/an unimaginable and impossibly/Immaculate Reconciliation/the very craziest/of Second Comings.”

Christ comes to the place not mentioned in the Christmas letter, the place not known even by the ones we love, the place where we are afraid because our meanness abides, the place where we are alone because our unloveliness lingers, the place where we are in need of a Savior because our sin has set us apart from those we were given to love. There he is born and there he abides.

Then finally, in these days after Christmas, I invite you to believe in the dark that Christ finds us not as we want, but just as we are. Writing after Christmas from his prison cell, Dietrich Bonhoeffer observed that, “The shepherds, like the wise men from the east, stand at the crib, not as converted sinners but because they were drawn to the crib by the star just as they were.” Just as they were! The story says nothing of angel voices calling for repentance, no mention of a prophet requiring justice or mercy, no priest exacting from them an offering, no Pharisee advising them of the law: only the call to come unto him just as they were.

The days after Christmas, even more than the days before, find us standing at the crib just as we are: collar bones broken, hearts in need of repair, divorces that can never be final, our best friend dead as a doornail, a son flunked out of college, a daughter’s acceptance deferred, a gall bladder acting up, a brain tumor threatening, all of us abiding in the field keeping watch over the crops that

have failed.

Just as you are, come unto him. Now he is born. Here he is born. Unto us he is born. So let us, with the shepherds by our side and the wise men not far behind, go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, and the babe lying in a manger. Believe in the darkness that the love that came down at Christmas has come to you. Then together let us return to the world as we left it, to darning and the eight-fifteen, glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen. Thanks be to God!