

## THE GOLDEN AGE OF CHRISTMAS

### Christmas Eve, 2011: Luke 2:1-20

For more years than I can remember I have read a Christmas story in place of the sermon for our Christmas Eve services. It has seemed to me that reading a story has the potential of bringing together the generations, already gathered for the spectacle of Christmas Eve candlelight, carols, music, and Holy Communion.

I love reading stories and being read to. In fact, my awareness of just how many Christmas stories there are came from listening to Alan Maitland, Fireside AI as Barbara Frum dubbed him, read story after story each December in the 1980s and 90s during the last half hour of CBC Radio's nightly program *As It Happens*. And even last night, from beyond the grave, CBC played Alan Maitland reading one of his favourite Christmas stories, "The Shepherd by Frederick Forsyth." It is such a powerful story, that it has become a tradition for *As It Happens* to play the recording each year, something as inevitable for CBC fans as the Queen's Christmas Day Message.

As you can imagine, each year I search for a story that speaks to me the truth about Christmas, a story that suggests what Christmas still means for people in a time and place that is worlds and millennia apart from the Christmas story recorded by Luke.

This year, however, I hit the wall in my research. As I do each year, I read and read and read to find the perfect story, and nothing hit the mark. Most recent stories are stories about the traditions that have put down roots and grown in our Christmas celebrations – nostalgia pieces on one level; art imitating art. The older stories, I feel, have a disturbing prophetic quality to them when read for the truth concerning Christmas. They suggest that there was once a Golden Age of Christmas which has now passed, and that we are now living in the afterglow of earlier times.

And so, I reflected on these things, and concluded that we have probably drifted away from our primary experience with the story Luke tells; that we have been willingly carried away by the romance and sensuality and extravagance of our Christmas celebrations and, quite honestly, found meaning in them, especially when we can take part of the Christmas message, such as the gift-giving of the magi and transform it into worthy projects and initiatives such as Franklin Graham's Operation Christmas Child; or local food and toy donations so that everyone in our community can have food on their table on Christmas Day and gifts for their children; or our own CLWR Gifts From the Heart campaign that will provide water wells and stoves and goats and educational opportunities for struggling communities in the Developing World. In our own experience of constantly struggling for meaning in the daily tsunami of news, issues, causes, revolutions, and losses we can scarcely begin to respond to, our celebration of Christmas, however we enter into it, provides an opportunity for intentional generosity and charity, and an occasion to set apart time to savour love and friendship, enjoy and appreciate our many blessings, and spend time being rather than doing.

But it is still probably true that we need to revisit Luke's story so that it can fulfill its purpose of inspiring our worship and fuelling our faith as words of life. Luke's story is a story with depth. A story as deep as the heart of God; and what gives it its depth is Luke's knowledge and love of God, so strong and so clear as to create for all his readers a beginning point for faith in a God who has not finished with people; a God who calls people both individually and collectively to faith and discipleship; a God who meets people where they are and leads them to a breadth of understanding concerning the spiritual basis of life; a proclamation, in other words, that this is God's world, not Satan's.

And so, because Jesus really lived, Luke roots his account of Jesus' birth in time and place, both somewhat approximate we acknowledge. Luke received his information from others, but it is clear that he listened to their stories with his heart, respecting the integrity of their enthusiasm for the life-changing effect the birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection of Jesus had had on them. Willingly, he suspended his disbelief concerning things he had never seen or perhaps even imagined, because he understood the truth of their proclamation which was that Jesus of Nazareth was the very heart and mind and spirit of the eternal God. We call it the miracle of the Incarnation, but for those who experienced Jesus first-hand, there was no clinical distance. He was simply the most astounding presence they had

ever known, able to speak to them, heal them, change them, love them in ways they could not every have imagined.

And so Luke takes what he has received, especially the enthusiasm his sources have for the gospel Jesus proclaimed, and weaves a birth story for his readers that will in and of itself be a proclamation. We know only too well the details. Even at his birth, there is no place it seems for Jesus: he is born in a barn or a cave: we cannot imagine a more humble beginning in life. And he remains humble throughout his life; and except with the common, ordinary people, he is always being asked to leave. Those who gather to worship him on the evening of his birth, Luke tells us, are the outcasts of society, shepherds who had the reputation of being rough around the edges, to say the least: a thumbnail of a later reality. Luke notes that Jesus' cradle was a manger, a feed trough. Theologians have made much of the manger as a metaphor in God's nurture of the world through Jesus. Quite wonderfully, Luke suggests in these very early days that Jesus' proclamation will be counter-cultural, anti-establishment, and anti-hierarchical. But we also learn that Jesus is given God's richest blessing: all heaven breaks loose, Luke tells us, glorifying and praising God for reaching deeply into the world and removing the distance people had created from God through religiosity, through establishing a religious elite of priests, Levites, scribes, and doctors of the law, through setting up a hierarchy in the temple at Jerusalem. All heaven continues to break loose whenever the gospel is embodied, Jesus teaches his followers. In fact, that's his message for his faithful ones.

When I was nine or ten years old, my father came home from choir practice one December complaining mildly that he had to learn a new hymn, the favourite Christmas carol of our minister Bob Craig, a carol unknown to the good people of First United Church, St. Thomas. I played it over on the piano for him as he sang along: I've always had the suspicion that my father had a secret motive for my beginning piano lessons at age four; I figure he wanted an accompanist. And he succeeded – but that's another story. I played the new hymn over and over, and as I got to the last verse, I realized why it was Mr. Craig's favourite: it suggests how we can welcome Jesus; it suggests how we can celebrate Christmas; it suggests what we should do with the familiar verses of Luke 2 when we hear them each Christmas Eve. As we receive the proclamation of Jesus through the magnificent story Luke has written, as we receive Jesus as the gift from God's heart, we can respond by giving our heart to Jesus. It's simple really, receiving the love and righteousness of God; very simple, but also very precious. When we do so, we establish the Golden Age of Christmas in a way that frees us from the need to find yet another good story that speaks the truth about Christmas. We become the story and its truth.