

The Scandal of the Incarnation

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So here we are on another Christmas Eve. I suspect some of you are exhausted from the many preparations that you have been making to get ready for the big holiday. In the process many have not taken even a moment to think about the reason we celebrate this great church feast. The craziness that we have built up around Christmas is a very recent phenomenon.

I was listening to the Jefferson Hour this past week and they were discussing what a low-key celebration Christmas was back in the late 18th and early 19th century. In fact it wasn't even celebrated in much of New England since the Puritans were totally against the celebration of what they called a pagan holiday. It was interesting that Clay Jenkins who plays Jefferson clearly said that this was never intended to be a national holiday in Jefferson's view. In fact Jefferson didn't think any religious holiday should be a national holiday. However it has and I fear that much of the symbolism and the reason for this celebration has been lost in the past 100 years or so as the focus has moved away from the religious significance to a very commercial holiday. My son James was amazed at what a huge holiday it was in Japan, but the total focus was on secular celebration and gift giving. I fear we are headed there at a very fast pace. That is the real war on Christmas.

I believe that sometimes we really don't know what to do with Christmas or at least what the celebration is really about. You see when you stop to think about the Incarnation the unbelievable act of God becoming man is what we really celebrate. The Incarnation makes no logical sense. You cannot look at this through logic or science. It is above all else both mystery and to quote Richard Rohr, a scandal. Theologians over the years speak of the scandal of the particular. That God chose to make himself known to us in a child, born in a specific place and a specific time is really quite remarkable. This makes Christianity unique among world religions. It is a mystery and sometimes mysteries are best experienced and not explained. Over the years I've gone through my own skeptical phases certainly in my 20s and 30s that was true.

Now however I've gotten to the place where I can say and truly believe, "Wow, what a wondrous thing God has done." I can leave it at that. I can't explain it logically nor do I need to now. I can just live in the mystery and enjoy God's wondrous love.

Some ask, why, why did God choose to do this wondrous thing? Well I came across a story by the radio announcer Paul Harvey that makes as good an explanation as any that I have heard and as a storyteller I just can't resist a good story. So here it is.

"There was once a man who didn't believe in God, and he didn't hesitate to let others know how he felt about religion and religious holidays, like Christmas.

His wife, however, did believe, and she raised their children to also have faith in God and the metaphysical meaning of Jesus the Christ, despite her husband's disparaging comments.

"One snowy night, his wife was taking their children to a Christmas Eve service in the farm community in which they lived. She asked him to come, but he refused. 'That story is nonsense!' he said. 'Why would God lower himself to come to Earth through a man called Jesus? That's ridiculous!' So she and the children left, and he stayed home.

"A while later, the winds grew stronger and the snow turned into a blizzard. Sitting in his living room he heard a loud thump. Something had hit the window. Then another thump. He looked out, but couldn't see more than a few feet. Bundling himself up, he ventured outside.

In the field near his house he saw a flock of wild geese. Apparently they had been flying south for the winter when they got caught in the snowstorm and couldn't go on—lost and stranded on his farm, with no food or shelter. A couple of them had flown into his window, it seemed. The man was moved to compassion and wanted to help them. The barn would be a great place for them to stay, he thought. It's warm and safe and there they could wait out the storm. So he opened the doors wide, hoping they would notice and go inside. But the geese just fluttered around aimlessly and didn't seem to notice the barn or realize what it could mean for them. He went into the house and came with some bread, broke it up, and made a bread crumb trail leading to the barn. They still didn't catch on. Getting frustrated, he got behind them and tried to shoo them toward the barn, but they only got more scared and scattered in every direction. Nothing he did could get them to go into the barn where they would be warm and safe.

" 'Why don't you follow me?!' he exclaimed. 'Can't you see this is the only place where you can survive the storm? If only I could become like one of them, then I could save them,' he said out loud. Then he had an idea. He went into barn, got one of his own geese, and carried it in his arms as he circled around behind the flock of wild geese. He then released it. His goose flew through the flock and straight into the barn and one by one the other geese followed it to safety.

"At that moment, he stopped and considered what he had said moments ago. The words reverberated in his mind: 'If only I could become like one of them, then I could save them.' At last, he understood God's heart towards humankind . . . and he fell on his knees in the snow. He had come to know the One who 'became one of us just to save us.' "

You see once again I want to stress that this salvation is not about Jesus coming to change God's mind about us, but to change our minds about God. For us to understand the different way, the radically different way God loves us, each and every one of us. Gods' love is totally beyond our understanding. That is what our traditional blessing for the end of the service says. "May the peace of God which can passes all understanding

keep your hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God and of his Son Jesus Christ." It is both our hearts and our minds, not just one, but both and that is the message of Christmas and the Incarnation.

I want to close tonight's thoughts with a prayer that the Presiding Bishop shared with us at Clergy Day and in his Christmas message to the church. It was written by Howard Thurman. Jesus became one of us in the form of Jesus, to show us how to be fully human. To live into the scandal of the reality of God's love for us as expressed by his gift of his son. Now the work of Christmas begins:

Now the Work of Christmas Begins

When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

I pray that you go from here tonight renewed, refreshed and ready for what lies ahead as we go forth to love and serve the Lord who came to be like us and with us. Merry Christmas to all.