

Sermon: Feast of the Incarnation

Texts: Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

According to the playwright, Thornton Wilder, for any performance of his play Our Town, the set, he instructed, should be minimal: no curtain, no scenery on the stage, only a couple of tables and a few chairs placed to the right and to the left, with a single bench set between them. Wilder specified this visual austerity to match what would be said and done in the play. He had honed everything down to its barest essentials. The characters have common names: George, Emily, Wally, Joe. They deliver newspapers and milk. Dr. Gibbs delivers babies. They carry books home from school and drink sodas at the drug store and spend evenings struggling with homework assignments. Grovers Corners is a town without the slightest hint of extravagance. Wilder didn't write about a vast, mythic battle between the powers of good and evil. The play doesn't include any exhilarating special effects or, in the fashion of Disney, portray something spectacularly imaginative. Our Town is simply any town and every town. It's community laid out in the plainest terms of unadorned humanity.

Yet, this austerity opens something important. For it subtly makes space for what, otherwise, might never be contemplated. What Wilder offers us from this particular stage is, in the end, words and thoughtfulness – words that might stand a chance of being really heard instead of being immediately buried under an avalanche of swirling sights and sounds. Late in the play, the narrator, the Stage Manager, offers us this insight: “Now, I'm goin' to tell you some things you know already,” he says. “You know 'em as well as I do; but you don't take them out and look at 'em very often.” Then, with an integrity that can come only from the purity of a sole human voice, speaking plainly, unassisted by any kind of technological wizardry, the Stage Manager declares: “I don't care what they say with their mouths – everybody knows that something is eternal. And it ain't houses and it ain't names, and it ain't earth, and it ain't even the stars... everybody knows in their bones that something is eternal, and that something has to do with human beings. All the greatest people ever lived have been telling us that for five thousand years and yet you'd be surprised how people are always losing hold of it. There's something way down deep that's eternal about every human being.”

This soliloquy is more than vague speculation, and yet it's something that no accumulation of facts will ever be able to prove or disprove either. But, when everything else is stripped away, all the ephemera, all the clutter and commotion of the day, what remains, at the heart of life, is this inkling, this restless yearning that is distinctly ours. Having voice for the eternal, we spend our time and energies somehow trying to reach it, to find its space and claim it. In his closing words, at the very finish of the play, Wilder acknowledges this with a last poignant observation: “There are the stars,” he notes, “– doing their old, old crisscross journeys in the sky. Scholars haven't settled the matter yet, but they seem to think there are no living beings up there. They're just chalk or fire. Only this one [star, this world] is straining away, straining away all the time to make something of itself. The strain's so bad that every sixteen hours everybody lies down to get a rest... [So] you get a good rest, too,” he advises.

That straining is our varied pursuit of something eternal, of a fulfillment in life that meets our sense of human worth. This is our predicament, our privilege, the deepest expression of our humanity and the task we seem unable to complete with satisfaction. We are left each day to struggle anew, never reaching that goal.

Luke's Gospel predates Wilder by a good long time, but in its way, the story of the Incarnation provides another word, another thought, but from a different voice, a voice that doesn't just advance our straining, but answers it. The setting is similarly austere: a common stable somewhere within the unremarkable town of Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph are not especially distinguished. They are simple people, just two more among the crowds that have gathered to be counted by the bureaucrats of the government. The story is centered around the bare necessity of physical nature. Mary gives birth, which has its own time, completely undetermined by intentions or desires or any of the complexities of planning that we might prefer it to honor. But this is the truth of our lives. We live within the random contingencies of finite time, subject to inconvenience, accident, and rude complications. And this, said Luke, is the very reality which God himself has chosen to address, into which he has chosen to interject himself, by his own bending down and descending into our pure ordinariness, as a child, helpless and dependent, who had no regal attire but was wrapped in cast off rags left in a barn.

Into this smallest of spaces, Luke tells us, the eternal came to us. God crossed the distance that, for all our straining, we cannot navigate. And he did this, not by a show of majestic strength, but by the surprising gentleness of a wholly surrendering love: God took our human form. Here, in this singular act and event, we have been given God's preeminent word, unadorned, spoken with the integrity of word literally becoming flesh. That night, angels sang their praise to God, and shepherds, hearing this, searched, as shepherds do, for that one, single creature outside the usual fold. Matthew spoke of the star that shone uncommonly, breaking the old, old crisscross pattern of countless centuries. Even the farthest reaches of creation acknowledged this miracle. And Mary pondered how heaven itself was made manifest for all the ages in her child.

In one sense, this is a simple story. In Jesus, God has taken on our mortality so that we need no longer strain to attain the immortality that we feel in our bones, yet never quite can gain. It has been delivered. The eternal has come to us, in as intimate a form as possible, and thus, the prime message, announced to all who witnessed it, was peace, the peace that arises from the recognition that none of us needs to try to save ourselves or manage our own immortality. For this has already been accomplished. Our lives may turn, then, to different, better efforts, arising from an inherent and inexhaustible joy rather than battling after things impossible to accomplish. This is the substance of our cheer.

Simplicity in our world, however, is often overwhelmed. Thornton Wilder's observation gets lost amid the ever increasing blaze of innovation and fascination that defines our modern life, as we tumble ever forward looking for what's new, what's next, and what will capture our attention for each ensuing immediate moment. And Luke's revelation, as Isaiah noted, falls victim, too, to the boots of tramping warriors, seeking victory, not peace, pursuing ideologies, not love, wanting dominance, not communion. These are the acute realities of our own time, no less than Isaiah's. Yet Luke's story, in spite of all, persists because God has chosen to show his infinite strength with infinite patience. God's word need never be shouted or angrily defended or violently

proclaimed because when it was spoken, most poignantly, by God himself, the word of God arrived as a mere infant to be held by us in soft embrace.

We would do well, in an age of shouting, to remember this smallness, this calm residing of all eternity within a mother's arms. For the beginning of all peace and all beauty and all true glory lies in the quiet of God's marvelous condescension to be so fully with us, so that we, by similar grace may show something of eternity's grace in our own lives. With such intimacy, in soft tones, may we all say, Merry Christmas.

The Rev. Peter Vanderveen