

“Light in the Darkness”

Luke 2:8-20

John 1:1-5, 14

December 24, 2015

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First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois
Christmas Eve

We all have Christmas stories, don't we? Stories from our childhood, like how every Christmas morning when I was growing up, after we opened our stockings from Santa, my parents would bring out a coffee cake with a candle on it and we'd sing “Happy Birthday” to Jesus.

Stories from our own kids' childhood, like how, when my daughter Annie was three and I was leading the children's time on Christmas Eve at our church in Portland, and Annie was glued to my side the whole sermon. It was so sweet! Later my husband told me that our daughter had had her finger up her nose the whole time. We still laugh about it.

My friend Tom Are's favorite family story is one he tells on himself. One Christmastime when their kids were still little, Tom woke up in the middle of the night:

“There was a noise. I heard it again. Someone was in our house. ... I got out of bed. ... The noise was in the kitchen, but I was having trouble hearing it over the pounding of my heart. I dialed 911 ... ‘911, what is your emergency?’ I gave her my address.

“Just as she was telling me help was on the way, I told her I could see the intruder. The intruder – the intruder was named Skippy. My kids had brought home the resident hamster [from] preschool. My children had volunteered to keep Skippy and his nocturnal self for the holidays but no one had bothered to tell dad. So there I am in my own kitchen with 911 on the line, terrified of Skippy [the hamster] who is home for the holidays.”¹

Now that's a Christmas story to keep!

We all have Christmas stories, don't we? Stories we pass on from generation to generation – stories that tell us who we are, and what really matters, and what Christmas is really all about.

Popular culture has its favorite stories too. A highlight from my childhood was “A Charlie Brown Christmas” – which celebrated its 50th anniversary this year. And, of course, this month it seems like “Star Wars” is its own Christmas story! It's everywhere –Star Wars tie-ins with Covergirl ads, Chrysler-Fiat, Subway sandwiches and Duracell batteries. My favorite is a church sign that reads, “A long time ago, in a Galilee far, far away” Apparently, it's not just the baby Jesus who wakes - the Force Awakens, too!

And in the midst of this season, our world has its own stories, doesn't it? This year, sadly, the dominant story has been of dark terror, and the incessant drumbeat of dread. With the rise of ISIS in Syria, with its ghastly videos designed to stoke fear, and the flood of refugees into Europe, and the series of random attacks in Paris, this month the terror came near to us, in the deadly rampage in San Bernardino. The fall-out in our country has been an escalating fear – fear of Muslims, fear of foreigners, fear of strangers, fear of the unknown. It hasn't helped that many, including a few noted politicians, seem intent on fanning the flames. The number 1 story dominating our world this Christmas? It's fear. Our dominant story is *fear*.

It's easy to understand why. There *are* real enemies in the world out there, and on top of that, there are real problems in our country, like guns and governance, and in our state, like the budget impasse that seems to never end. And for some of us, there are even *real* invaders in our homes – not robbers *per se*, but life-threatening illnesses, or children who are facing scary challenges, or marriages that are fraught with tension, or financial strains that terrify us. Fear makes a gripping story.

But fear ... fear, in its grip, can choke the life out of us if we let it. Even Star Wars gets that right: Luke Skywalker's old mentor, Yoda, reminds him that "Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger, anger leads to hate, hate leads to suffering."ⁱⁱ Fear *is* the path to the dark side. But that's not where God wants us to end up. The dark side is not where God wants us to end up.

Isn't that why we're all here tonight on Christmas Eve? Don't we gather here to tell a different story? We tell a story that begins and ends: "Fear not." Like Yoda reminding Luke Skywalker, the angel reminds Mary and Joseph: "Fear not." The angel reminds the shepherds: "Fear not." The angel reminds us: "Fear not – fear not, for a child has been born to us." "Fear not, for the Lord is with you." "Fear not, for the light shines in the darkness, and no darkness can ever overcome it."

Maybe that's why "A Charlie Brown Christmas" has endured so long as it has ... because it tells that story so well. I love that Charlie Brown constantly asks what the true meaning of Christmas is. He's ignored by Snoopy, who's busy decorating his doghouse ... he's ignored by kids in the pageant, who just want to dance around ... he's ignored – of course - by Lucy. Finally, Charlie Brown screams out in frustration, "Can't anyone tell me the true meaning of Christmas?" That's when Linus, who's always clinging to his dusty, well-worn security blanket, takes center stage and begins to recite the story:

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.”

And then, an amazing thing happens. When Linus gets to the point where the angels say to the shepherds, “Fear not, for behold! I bring you good tidings” - Linus drops his blanket. After 50 years of watching Linus tell this story, I had never noticed it before. Someone pointed it out to me, or I might very well have missed it again. As Linus tells the Christmas story, as Linus says, “Fear not!”, he drops his security blanket.ⁱⁱⁱ

Maybe this year – maybe this year we could make that part of our story too: to let go of our well-worn security blankets, and let the good news of God’s presence sink in. To let go of our storied insecurities, and believe the angel’s promise. To let go of our gripping fear, and trust instead God’s word to us: “Fear not.” “Fear not.”

Don’t get me wrong – the darkness is real, and the fear is real too. But the light? The light is enough to guide our way. The glory of the Lord that shines this night? It’s enough to illuminate our path.

Tonight, we tell a different story than the world tells. Tonight, we tell the story that says God is with us... God hasn’t forgotten the world God made ... the world God so loves.

Tonight, we tell a different story than the world tells. Tonight, we tell a story that says all the powers wanting to wrest control over our lives aren’t nearly as powerful as the disarming powers of love and compassion.

Tonight, we tell a different story than the world tells. A story that says a humble woman and a faithful man who yield to the will of God can turn the world upside down.... And a child born in the midst of us can be the Savior of the world.

Tonight, we tell a different story than the world tells. A story that says that yes, the darkness is real, and fear is real too. But there’s a light that shines in that darkness – a light that the darkness can never, ever overcome. Amen.

ⁱ Tom Are, pastor, Village Presbyterian Church, Prairie Village, KS, in a paper presented January, 2013 to the Moveable Feast study group.

ⁱⁱ William K. Neely, “Fear is the Path to the Dark Side,” December 16, 2015, <http://williamkneely.com/blog/?p=568>

ⁱⁱⁱ Neely, citing Soroski.