

CHRISTMAS MEDITATION

Post Presbyterian Church

December 23, 2007

“In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it..... And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” **John 1: 1-5, 14**

A few years ago, (December, 1999) Barbara Brown Taylor wrote an article that was published in *The Christian Century* about the way our culture celebrates the Christmas season. It was titled “Holy Instincts” and in it she observes that some of the poorest homes in her part of the country often have the most spectacular Christmas decorations. She says, “If I had judged a contest last year, first prize would have gone to a house trailer by the highway just south of town.

The trailer I admired was an eyesore by day, with dented baby blue aluminum siding and tiny sliding windows that stayed steamed up with all the breathing, cooking and living that was going on inside. Gaudy plastic kid's toys littered the little strip of grass out front, which was dominated by a satellite dish and a late model Ford truck under a makeshift carport. By night, the place was Wonderland. The satellite dish had so many colored lights on it that it looked like a beached spaceship. The carport was also rimmed with lights, and the roof of the trailer had become a landing strip for Santa's sleigh, drawn by a full complement of reindeer. I imagine that there were children in that trailer who needed new shoes more than they needed a plastic Santa, as well as adults who probably needed justice more than they needed a fantasy of colored lights.

But what I am noticing this year is the holy spark that smolders underneath all this gratuitous tinsel and voltage. At least that is what I think it is. While true believers lament the crass commercialization of Christmas and the loss of Jesus as the reason for the season, I see the Holy Spirit haunting the most secular of ceremonies: a string of cheap lights to illumine the darkness perhaps to remind us that the way things are is not the way they must always be. The decorated trailer house is a modern day image Jesus might have worked into one of his parables: the

kingdom of heaven is like a broken-down house trailer made beautiful for a child's eyes.

There are all kinds of things wrong with the way we celebrate Christmas. We eat too much, we spend too much, we sentimentalize too much, and we worry too much. But these excesses cannot douse the holy instincts that underlie them. We really are hungry. We really do want to give and receive. We really do want to feel deeply, live peaceably, sleep soundly and rise renewed. As the season moves toward its crescendo those of us who believe we know where the holy instincts are leading may do more good by wading into our culture than by separating ourselves from it. Because God is in the midst of it all, still hunting new flesh in which to be born.”

The light and life of God is truly in the midst of all we acknowledge and affirm during this cold, dark time of the year. The light and life of God is indeed “still hunting new flesh in which to be born.” For those of us who have experienced profound losses, difficult cancer treatments, and unsettling challenges at work and at home this year, we are more in need of the light, peace and new life we are promised by the birth of Jesus Christ in to our lives once again.

Probably the most meaningful Christmas that Kyle and I celebrated was thirteen years ago when I was let out of the hospital on Christmas morning. I was pregnant with Elliot and on December 23rd I had had emergency surgery to stop internal bleeding. We were scared and hopeful and in shock and just so thankful that everything was still okay with my pregnancy. Spending Christmas Eve in the hospital unexpectedly put a halt to all of our planned activities and allowed us to focus on how thankful we were to have each other in this scary and difficult time.

So what is Christmas really about? In the book, **My Grandfather's Blessings**, Rachel Remen tells a story from her childhood that so beautifully illustrates the gift of Christmas. Rachel Remen said, "Every Christmas Eve when I was small, my father and I would take the subway to downtown Manhattan and go shopping for presents for my mother, my aunt, my friends, my teacher and other important persons in my life. These were special, even magical, times. Everything was decorated for Christmas. The windows of the stores up and down Fifth Avenue were magnificent, and some even had whole mechanical villages that moved or a mechanical Santa that waved. It was almost always cold, and the nighttime streets

were crowded with smiling people carrying beautifully wrapped packages, the women in furs and men in overcoats with velvet collars. Thinking back on it now after more than fifty years, it seems to me that I could see the joy in people shining in the streets. Christmas music poured out of every open doorway. In my memory, it is always lightly snowing, and everyone had snowflakes on their coats and in their hair.

We would start at Rockefeller Plaza and stare in awe at the enormous, beautifully decorated tree, debating whether this year's decorations were more beautiful than last. They always were. We would watch the skaters for a while. And then we would move slowly down Fifth Avenue, stopping in every store, thinking of the people I loved, one at a time, looking at many, many things until I found just the right one for each one of them. At some point during the evening, my father would hand me his big gold pocket watch and tell me that when it chimed I was to come and meet him right where we were standing, and then I would go off alone in whatever store we were in to find his present. While I was gone, my father would do a little shopping of his own.

I got to stay up late, far later than my usual bedtime, and it was often close to midnight when we got home, our arms filled with boxes, each of which had been specially wrapped at the store. My mother always had cocoa waiting, and we would show her the beautiful boxes and tell her about the wonderful things we had found for everyone---but not, of course, what we had found for her.

It was a chance to think about each one of my beloved people, who they were and what might make them glad. I remember the indescribable feeling of finding each present and the joy of recognizing it as just the very thing. There was such pleasure in choosing the paper and the ribbon and watching it wrapped in a way that was as special as the person it was for. I loved finding these presents. It made me feel very lucky.

In thinking back, I realize that I never actually saw many of these presents opened. They would be mailed away or left under other people's Christmas trees. Somehow this never mattered. The important moment wasn't in the opening, or in the thanking. The important thing was the blessing of having someone to love."

The blessing of having someone to love and be loved by is perhaps the most poignant message of Christmas. About a month ago one of my husband's oldest and best friends from college called to tell us he had recently been contacted by a social worker at the adoption agency where his parents had gotten him 41 years ago to let him know that his birth mother wanted to meet him. Mark has always had a healthy perspective about his being adopted and has a close relationship with his three sisters and parents. He has said for many years that out of respect for his birth mother, he would never try to contact her and didn't want to face the disappointment of discovering her to be a bag lady! Mark also has a warped sense of humor and said that if she ever tried to find him it would probably be because she was in need of one of his kidneys or part of his liver!

When he received the call from the social worker, he told her he wanted to be put in touch with his birth mother and in mid-October, Mark flew to meet her and her husband of 40 years (not his birth father) and has begun incorporating a new significant relationship into his life and the lives of his wife and three young daughters (ages 5, 3, and 1). Mark reported to Kyle that after a few days of getting acquainted and spending late

nights talking and drinking wine, his birth mother informed him that she didn't want any part of his liver!

When I talked with Mark's wife, April a few weeks ago, she said that Mark's birth mother was coming to meet her and the girls and spend a weekend with them in their home and they were trying to figure out what the girls would call her and how they were going to explain the gift of adoption. Kyle and I feel privileged to be privy to the unfolding of this holy story and to have received from Mark the first letters he received from his birth mother and her husband. As we celebrate the sacred connection in our lives this Christmas time, I would like to share a portion of the first letter Mark received from her:

Dear Heart,

This is a letter I have waited years to write and that I have written in my head with enough words to fill several books. Through Maggie Benson's intercessions, I gather that you are the son I place for adoption 41 years ago. To this day, that event represents the deepest trench of sadness and regret I have ever experienced. What kept me going was the kindness of strangers who guided me through the adoption system and who assured me that your placement was to be with a good family

with parents who would treasure you. I gather that is exactly what happened, and that you have achieved a happy and successful life. I am grateful for that.

Her letter goes on to talk about the failed attempts she made to find him twenty years ago before the internet made this attempt successful and to tell him more about herself, her husband and their two boys. She concludes her letter with these heartfelt sentiments:

“There is so much to tell you and so much I would love to learn about you. Perhaps all that really matters as I write this first letter is to tell you that you have always meant everything to me, that in 1966 I concluded that adoption was the better alternative for the two of us, and that I have always felt a keen sense of loss from the moment I walked away from Savannah Memorial Hospital knowing that there would be many miles and perhaps forever in time, separating us. I always loved you and always will.

I have no desire to insinuate myself into your life in a way that makes you uncomfortable, or to appear to threaten your lifetime’s worth of relationships in any way. To the extent that

knowing me can enrich your life by filling in some blanks and by adding in someone else who cares about you, I am here.”

The blessing of having someone to love and be loved by is perhaps the most poignant message of Christmas. To be honest, Kyle and I are both a bit jealous that our dear friend now has two very functional families that love him dearly! This beautiful story reminds us that the holy message of Christmas is how God’s love continues to be born in to our hearts and lives where we need to know that we are accepted and wanted and loved and valued and cherished. God’s love is born where our grief and losses and sufferings are deepest and most profound. God’s love is born where we are most vulnerable; God’s love is born into our fears, anxieties, hurts, hopes, and dreams where we can be strengthened and moved to share our gifts of love and talents of creativity so that our world is made more whole and we become more complete!

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ this year, may the lights of the season bring us comfort and joy and may the warmth of the Spirit hold us especially close at this difficult time. During this Christmas season, may we be open to the new ways God is being born into the hurts and longings of our lives with hints of life and

hope. May we give thanks for the many ways the Holy One continue to bless us with hope and presence. And may we find unique and personal ways to reach out to others in need and help to heal the wounds of our world with gracious acts of love and kindness.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving and Holy God,

We gather on this day before Christmas with the hopes and fears of all the years in our hearts. As the stores close, the shopping ceases, and our last minute preparations wind down, we are left to ponder the real meaning of Christmas in our lives. When all is going well for us and we feel that we have the world by the tail, it is often much easier to have faith. But when we have problems in our health and work and relationships and families, then we feel quite vulnerable and alone and wonder more deeply about the presence of God with us and the power of God in us. I sometimes wonder if all of our frenzied activity at this time of the year helps us to not think too deeply about the significance of Jesus' birth in our lives because it is probably much easier to be busy and tired than it is to look and wait and listen and prepare for the stirrings of new life.

Give us this Christmas, the eyes and ears and hearts of young children who give themselves over to the magic and the excitement and who remind us tired, worn-out and cynical adults of the new life that comes to us in our pain, boredom, failures, and broken places and waits to give us healing,

courage, and much new life if we are willing to give up our need to control and tell God how it needs to be. As we listen to the Christmas story again this year in words and songs, remind us that the people God chose and the events that unfolded were for the most part out of everyone's control and realm of predictability and imagination.

During this Christmas season may we be more fully aware of the love that comes to us as a gift and may we be willing to let our lifestyles and our choices reflect the love of God incarnated in Jesus. We ask that our loved ones and friends who are sick, grieving, distressed and not up to par this Christmas be blessed by the love and presence of friends and family as well as the love and presence of those dear ones who have gone on before them. In the days ahead, help us O god to hear once again the singing of angels, the baby's cry and your eternal, life-giving words to us, as we pray together, Our Father who art in heaven...AMEN.