

THE MYSTERY UNFOLDS ITSELF, AGAIN, AND AGAIN

A Christmas Eve Sermon 2016

St. Paul's Cathedral, Kamloops BC

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Begging your indulgence, I need your help. I am trying to find a decent Christmas Movie. It is remarkable to me just how bad most available offerings are. That said, there are exceptions. My favourites include: *A Charlie Brown Christmas*; I love the original Alistair Sims take on Scrooge. The best of all presently is the *Season One Christmas Special* of the BBC mid-twentieth Century drama, *Call the Midwife*.

Young Jenny is one of a half dozen midwives living with Anglican nuns in a poor area of East London in the late fifties and sixties of the last century. They see and experience things beyond their wildest imagination – poverty, struggle, death, anger, even evil. They also see tenacity, compassion, and love in action. As secular employees of a religious order, they find their faith, morals, and compassion tested, even at Christmas. At the conclusion of the Christmas special, after a whirlwind of adventures, struggles, and some triumphs, Jenny concludes her thoughts with these words:

“It was a Christmas as unique as any other.
For every year the mystery unfolds itself anew.
In later life, I came to see that faith, like hope
was a rope and anchor in a shifting world.
Faith cannot be questioned, only lived.
And if I could not grasp it then
I felt its heartbeat, which was love . . . “

The mystery unfolds itself anew . . . indeed. How many times have we heard this same, wonderful story, a story overlaid with the aspirations

and mixed motives of age after successive age of readers, hearers, and life-actors? The Christmas story presents a challenge especially for preachers: How do we breathe new life into a familiar story, one that often blinds us as we try to move beyond the clichés of the season? The American author, storyteller and theologian Brian McLaren sums up Christmas in these words:

“Politicians compete for the highest offices. Business tycoons scramble for a bigger and bigger piece of the pie. Armies march and scientists study and philosophers philosophise and preachers preach and labourers sweat. **But in that silent baby, lying in that humble manger, there pulses more potential power and wisdom and grace and aliveness than all the rest of us can imagine.**”

The irony is huge: From something so small, someone seemingly powerless, through an event so socially inconsequential, has come something, some movement, some real life force more powerful than armies, governments or global financial institutions. No matter how clearly Holy Scripture describes things, we still behold a mystery, an experience uncomfortably received in an age which prefers detail, data and prose over poetry, mysticism, and wonder. A personal hero, Joan Chittester writes about mystery this way:

“God is the mystery nobody wants. What people covet in God is not mystery but certainty. God is what everyone seeks to be sure about. And is not.”

Now I agree that mystery seems like a luxury of the privileged. What mystery can solve the challenges of present day politics, the unequal distribution of wealth, rampant food insecurity, climate injustice and the increasing appeal of retribution as a social and societal norm. Mystery can be likened to the spiritualist practices enjoyed by the late nineteenth-century British upper class epitomized by Noel Coward’s *Blythe Spirit*.

Give us *something concrete* we cry, to strengthen our resistance and support our advocacy. Remembering John the Baptist we cry aloud to God, alleviate the injustices of our day and do it now please.

If we think our modern age has moved beyond ancient struggles we are very wrong. The Quaker writer Parker Palmer reminds us that our aspirations are not unlike those of those folks called “Holy family” “shepherds” and town folk described in Luke’s magical narrative. All was not well in Jerusalem, Rome, Alexandria and Antioch in Jesus’ day. All is not well in Washington, Ottawa, Berlin, and Aleppo in our own day.

This situational similarity admitted, I love the phrase from an spiritual songwriter, Carrie Newcomer: “The things that *have saved us are still here* to save us.”

For me, this year, the phrase has become a mantra. *The things that have saved us are still here to save us*. No, the job is not yet done, but the promise remains. In the spirit of the serenity prayer, we change what we can but we acknowledge our influential limits. We trust less in our own abilities knowing the limited power available to us. As I remind myself and others, if the job were easy someone would have done it by now.

So we wait, and we trust . . . in those things, those ideas and persons which genuinely promote and celebrate life and a healthy world. We reject the darkness and love the light. The light shines in the darkness and is not overcome. Friends, this is such Good News. To live in such a way is the only way of living I can personally recommend. We can celebrate together, not because everything *is accomplished*, but because the very journey of life continues, and things—reconciliations, restitutions, re-establishments, *are being accomplished* in our midst, where faith, hope and love remain central to our being.

So as Tiny Tim says “God bless us every one” and God bless us each and every Christmas and on all days given to us to steward and cherish. Amen.