

Eglinton St. George's United Church,
Toronto, Ontario.

Thursday, December 24th, 2009.
Christmas Eve. ~ 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.

"WHEN 'NOT YET' BECOMES 'NOW'"
(Christmas Eve. Sermon by Rev. Don Parsons)

Scripture Lesson:- Luke 2: 1 – 20

Well friends, I hate to be the one to break the news to you, but I think you may have run out of time to do your Christmas shopping. Santa has left his throne in the centre of the mall, and at last report was somewhere over Nunavut.

It seems that our season of waiting is finally over. "Not Yet" has become "Now".

All the preparations have been made, and we are here at last to begin to settle into a mystery – to feel the flutter of angels' wings, and listen for the rustle of some Bethlehem straw.

We know the carols, we know the readings, we know each character gathered in the Bethlehem crèche, we know the whole story so well we can tell it by heart – the shepherds, the angel chorus, the star, the baby.

And now it is time for us to enter the scene.

For tonight is the night when we must figure out how we are going to respond when Mary looks at us and asks, "Would you like to hold my baby?"

Perhaps if we are courageous enough, or naïve enough, or curious enough, we will reach out and cradle him – this precious God-child – in our arms.

For somewhere in our faith journey we have been told that this baby is the result of God's love affair with us.

It is a rather scandalous move when you think about it – God setting aside majesty, omnipotence, Old Testament power and might for everyday diapers and a teething ring.

Oh God could have come to us as a streak of light searing the midnight sky;
or in a voice like the roll of timpani thundering through the universe.

But no – a baby is the ultimate expression of God's presence in our lives -- so profound, so simple – "brilliant" as our British friends put it.

So now, the challenge -- how do we respond to this gift?

// It was the third Sunday of Advent, a few years ago.

The children of our Church School were lining up to enter the sanctuary for their Christmas concert.

It was like a parade – wee angels with tinsel halos slipping off their heads;

three regal Magi – all female – a fitting tribute, I thought, in this equal opportunity era;
some barnyard animals whose familiar human faces smiled and winked at me;
and many six and seven year old shepherds in bathrobes and tea-towel head bands.

In order to be helpful, I was standing at the door. My intention was to hold the door open for them.

While they were waiting, one of those shepherds, a seven year old with deep brown eyes, looked up at me very seriously, and said,

"You can't be a shepherd, because you're not *young* enough!" //

Here was a seven year old, explaining to the Senior Minister of Port Nelson United Church that I could not be a shepherd – I could not go to the manger – because I was not young enough.

How many times had he been told, “When you are older, you can...”

“When you grow up, you’ll be able to...”

It was a rather sobering moment for me.

Somehow I felt that an ancient word had found its way through all the years of history from the lips of someone named Jesus, to the lips of a seven year old shepherd, and said something like “Unless you become like a child, you cannot... you cannot enter the kingdom...”

Now what do you suppose the Holy One was saying to me through my seven year old friend?

Could it be something like this -- that we cannot really come to the manger unless we have an open spirit? Perhaps it means setting our sophisticated questions aside, even if just for one night...

Because I have a hunch that sometimes our skepticism, our need to figure everything out, our discomfort with mystery prevents us from experiencing the heart of Christmas.

// One evening on CBC Radio’s “As It Happens”, they were interviewing a man in England who claimed to be an atheist, but who was also ready to concede that there just might be “a higher intelligence”. Well whoop-de-do!

I wondered why that kind of admission deserves an interview in prime time radio. Former Moderator Bruce McLeod has pointed out that “Even atheists when they date their letters, must count the years since Christ was born.” (*“Sunday Morning at Captiva Chapel by the Sea”* p. 35) //

What about all those who over the centuries have lived their faith without fanfare, day after day, year after year –

making our world more beautiful with their music, and their art, and soaring architecture;
transforming with generous kindness and caring the lives of others into something
that is healing, and life-giving and good – making a difference;
creating heaven on earth by simple acts of thoughtful, lavish love –
making a difference every day because they have dared to hold
this baby – this God-love – in their arms – and believed.

It seems to me that these are the folk who deserve radio interviews – those who because of their belief have moved us a little closer to the kind of world God dreams is possible for us.

Maybe we will never understand, or experience the manger unless we come with an open spirit.

Do you think it is also possible that our fear prevents us from coming to the manger?

// A friend of mine once pointed out that “the opposite of faith is not doubt, but fear. //

Is it not interesting that on the night of Christ’s birth, when earth’s history in many ways began again, the shepherds were filled not with doubt, but with fear.

Some believe that shepherds were despised by their society, cast out like prostitutes and thieves, the lowest of the low.

So when the heavens were filled with dancing light, these sheep herders thought it was the end, they were so afraid.

The first word that came to them that night was not “Try to believe,” but rather “Don’t be afraid”.

I wonder what it would mean if “fear not” came to us?

What would have to happen for fear to be minimized in our world?

Would the banning of all nuclear weapons, all land-mines and chemical weapons – would that take care of the fear? It would certainly help, but the fear would not be gone.

Would narrowing the gap between rich and poor, between ourselves and others who are hungry, and homeless, and cold, and ill – would that alleviate the fear? Again, it would help, but the fear would not be gone.

Would building respect for each other, refusing to categorize others with silly distinctions like gay and straight, white and black, middle class and poor,

would forgiving the hurt we inflict on each other, learning instead to value and trust and love each other – would that still the fear? Yes, that would go a long way... but...

If we want the fear to be gone, maybe we need to look in a most unlikely place -- maybe where life is lived at its deepest, and simplest levels.

The gospel writer says that if we put our trust in this new born child, that will keep the fear at bay.

Maybe that seven-year-old shepherd was speaking holy truth – a paradox really -- that if we are to understand and experience the profound meaning of this holy birth we celebrate tonight, we must find a way to become more child-like....

// My friend Adrian helps me understand what that might be like.

Adrian is now in his late teens – a special needs young man (Down’s Syndrome) – who was a significant part of our Burlington congregation. He participated fully in our two-year confirmation program, and became a neat friend.

On my last Christmas Eve. at Port Nelson, I asked Adrian if he would like to help me distribute candlelight throughout the congregation – as we will here in a few moments.

He agreed, and at the appropriate moment in the service, came to the front to get his light with me from the Christ Candle in the centre of the Advent wreath.

Because he has poor eyesight, not wanting him to miss a step, I held out my hand to him as he was about to come down the chancel steps with his candle.

My intention was that once on the main level, Adrian would light the candles on one side of the centre aisle, and I would do the same on the other side.

Adrian did take my hand as he came down the chancel steps – but he did not let it go.

So together, a special needs teen and a minister who had been told once that he was not young enough to be a shepherd, hand in hand, shared the light of Christ, moving slowly through the congregation. //

I have thought often of that unscripted, holy moment,

and how my young friend Adrian with his open spirit, and his simple trust, and the gift of his joy, and generous love, have helped me experience the presence of God alive in our midst.

In some beautiful, mysterious way, may God also come alive for you, this holiest of nights....

Amen.