

ANGELS BENDING NEAR THE EARTH

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

December 24, 2009

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

In Margaret Craven's lovely book *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*, there is a young minister, Mark Brian, who is newly ordained and, is sent by the bishop to a Native American village in the great Northwest, Kingcome, the toughest parish in the diocese, where life is hard, the tribe of Native Americans are difficult, and the winter is cold and bitter. Mark finds himself beset by a sense of futility in this lonely outpost. He wonders if he can make a difference at all, and for a young man, there is not much for him in such a far away place with so little possibility of friendship.

On his first Christmas Eve as a pastor, young Father Mark goes to the church to prepare for the midnight service. He brings in a load of logs for the stove furnace, washes the soot from his hands, puts on his vestments, lights the candles, and then pauses by the window to look down to the village spread below. The author writes:

He saw the lights of the houses go out, one by one, and the lanterns begin to flicker as the tribe came slowly, single file along the path to the church. ...He went to the door and opened it, and he stepped out into the soft white night, the snow whispering now under the footfalls. For the first time he knew them for what they were, the people of his hand and the sheep of his pasture, and he knew how deep was his commitment to them.¹

I think of that scene each year on Christmas Eve and think of all of you who have gathered here maybe not bringing lanterns to light your footpath to the village church, but coming nonetheless to this Village Church to hear again the story that defines our fondest hope and shapes our greatest desire; to know that we are known by God, and loved by God as well. That in this great expansive universe, and impersonal city we are not alone.

For one reason or another everybody here tonight, church members, nonmembers, believers and nonbelievers, the faithful and the skeptic have come here out of the suspicion that a church on Christmas Eve may be the likeliest place in town to hear the story we most need to hear. The story of a journey to a stable, and a young set of parents wide eyed and exhausted from the travel and the birthing. A story of shepherds who gather in a borrowed stall, and magi guided by a star who come and worship Christ the newborn king.

It's that story that we long to hear. So we have left the family rituals and usual gatherings to make our way to the church tonight to do so. There may be a few presents yet to wrap before sleep comes, or some gifts to lay under the tree for nodding children nestled all snug in their beds at this hour. Maybe there is still some toy that requires assembly or something that needs to marinate overnight. But for the most part, Christmas is ready. The weeks of waiting are over, the stampedes of midnight madness are past, the gifts are bought, the cards have arrived, the friends are here, the family is gathered round.

So we sing the carols and come to church to find ourselves somewhere in the story of a Savior's birth.

And we get here like a runner throwing his chest against the final tape that marks the end of the marathon. It's a mad dash all month for most of us. There are all the holiday parties, and the crush at work, the tree to put up, and the Nursery School pageant, the gifts to buy, and the cards to mail, and the thank-yous to send. It's a stressful time the psychologists tell us, mixed with memories of the ghost of Christmas past and Blackberrys overflowing of commitments to the ghost of Christmas present.

My friend John Buchanan Pastor at Fourth Church in Chicago tells the story of a child in the Sunday School in that congregation. On the first Sunday of Advent, one of the Sunday School teachers asked her class of six-year-olds what the time before Christmas is called. A bright little girl raised her hand and said, "It's called Advil!"

Well, I suppose so, it's like that sometimes.

For me and for most people I know, Christmas is a mixture of memories, memories about childhood and people and home, wherever home is, especially when home is not where you are, because home is more people than place, more a state of mind than a state of location. Which is I suppose why we get nostalgic when we talk about going home for Christmas.

One of my favorite carols of this season is "It Came Upon the Midnight Clear," whose third verse describes the condition of so many of us especially this year, pondering where we are. Pondering what we are doing here. You remember the words,

*And ye beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow...*

And who of us these days doesn't have some of that weight on our shoulders bending us over this year?

I saw one of the older ladies in the Caring Community on the elevator Monday and asked her how she made out in the snow over the weekend. "Not very well," she said. "I've had two knee replacements and the last thing in the world I need to do now is fall down in the snow." And I was just annoyed that my shoes were getting salt on them!

Young or old, it's been quite a year. Some of you have known a season without work, or a time when work has become so burdensome that there is little satisfaction left in it. Those who are retired are still looking at a pension that is depleted and savings that are less than they once were. It's a leaner Christmas this year.

Unemployment in New York City is running at 10% and everybody feels the bite these days. And that's not the only thing that leaves us bending low.

Around the world there is unsettledness tonight. We cannot seem to agree as a world community that the earth is living on borrowed time, that the carbon imprint that we are leaving on the environment is a debt that our children and grandchildren will have to bear. In Copenhagen, the nations of the world did not seem to speak the same language, *in more ways than one*.

Far from home tonight, soldiers patrol in armored vehicles in rugged terrain among people whose lives and struggles they barely understand, and whose future is most uncertain. Eight years we have been Afghanistan, and almost seven Iraq, and who really knows when it will be over?

In the little town of Bethlehem, in the Palestinian territory, there is an uneasy peace tonight. Where shepherds once grazed their sheep abiding in the fields, a wall now cuts across the landscape. And who of us has any answers there?

As if that weren't enough, the cover of the December 7th issue of *Time* magazine showed a crying baby sitting in the middle of the leftovers of a New Year's Eve party. The headline read "The Decade from Hell." Listing the calamities of the last decade the article began with Y2K, then 9/11, then the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Hurricane Katrina and then financial meltdown summarized in the conclusion that the past decade "will likely go down as the most dispiriting and disillusioning decade Americans have lived through since World War II."

*And ye beneath life's crushing load
Whose forms are bending low,
who toil along the climbing way
with painful steps and slow...*

It's a different kind of Christmas this year. More spare, more reflective, more modest somehow. How could it not be so? Oh, there will still be engagements to celebrate, and maybe a special gift here and there, some extravagance that is more money spent than good sense, but somehow this past year and recent years have made us more sober about what really is important in our lives.

If ever there was a time for angels to bend near the earth, as the carol suggests, this would be the time, in the midst of our winter loneliness, in this season of our greatest need.

I don't usually look to the *New York Times* for theology, but Monday there was a column by the conservative op-ed writer Ross Douthat. He was writing about the new blockbuster movie *Avatar* and its latent theological assumptions of pantheism, the idea that God is encompassed in nature. So the Na'Vi, the alien race from Pandora are saved by their faith in Eywa, the "All Mother," which is a network of energy and the sum total of every living thing.

Douthat says that ever since Kevin Costner danced with wolves, and George Lucas' Jedi looked to the Force to guide the universe, Hollywood has been in a search for a God who has no clearer existence than what can be found in nature.

The problem is that nature is cruel, animals stalk and kill weaker animals, violent storms wipe out villages without a thought, tsunamis sweep away populations without warning, and violence is inherent in the natural order.

As Ross Douthat notes,

Religion exists, in part, precisely because humans aren't at home amid these cruel rhythms. We stand half inside the natural world and half outside it. We're beasts with self-consciousness, predators with ethics, mortal creatures who yearn for immortality. This is an agonized position, and if there's no escape upward – or no God to take on flesh and come among us, as the Christmas story has it – [it is] a deeply tragic one.”

Maybe that's why we have come out into the cold and the dark of this night, made our way through the remaining slush and darkness, turned the lights out at home, carried our lanterns and made our way to a Village Church, to huddle in the pew with family and strangers to hear once again a story of Christmas. The story of a God whose love for us wants to be made flesh and dwell among us.

We come because in the deepest heart of our heart we need to believe that there is hope for this human race. That at that point where we would give up on God, God has not given up on us.

There is something about Christmas, I suppose, that always makes me think of my family, the family in which I grew up. My mother, who died twenty five years ago, in her latter years, lived in a nursing home in Sparks, Nevada so that she might be near my sister Judy who was very attentive to my mother.

I visited in Nevada last summer, and during a family picnic, I listened to my nephews and nieces who talked about their grandmother, and how they loved her, but also about how difficult it was to visit her as the years went on and she became less competent mentally. One of my nieces now grown up with a child of her own said, “I just couldn't go to see grandma that way any more. She just wasn't herself and it was too hard to be with her that way.”

My mother had Alzheimer's disease and in the latter stages of her decline, did not know where she was, or what day it was, or who people were. But I visited twice a year for about a week, as often as I was able, and spent as much time as I could with her. I took candy which she always loved, and I would push her wheelchair around the halls because she liked the sensation of movement and going someplace.

In the last few years before she died, my mother did not know who I was, save that I was a kindly voice and someone who seemed to be good to her. Of course I knew who she was, and who I was to her.

So I talked to her in the only way I was able as if she understood completely what I was saying. I talked about my work and where I was living and what I was doing and what my friends were doing, and what I hoped to do next. I carried on conversations

with her, and as much as I was able, brought my life to hers, which was all we had left. And sometimes I would pass the aides and staff people who knew my mother's situation and who seemed to look at me with a look that said, "Why bother?" Why bother?

Why? Because God's love is made real when we reach across the boundaries that separate our lives. When we do what God did; use what we have to bear our love to one another. Why did I bother? Because that's what God did this Christmas night, crossed the barrier that separates us, and entered into our life and knew what it was to be like us.

Angels bend low to earth sometimes, and kings are born in barns, and Christ is born whenever there is a tangible expression of God's love in human likeness, whenever God's love is expressed in flesh and blood.

I have good news tonight. God has not given up on us. God is still coming to us and reaching out to us. And even though we do not fully understand all that God is saying to us in this birth, God is nonetheless born among us in the only way that bridges heaven with earth. For God has taken human flesh and dwelt among us.

Merry Christmas, a very merry Christmas, after all.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2009.

¹ Margaret Craven, *I Heard the Owl Call My Name*. New York: Dell, 1973.57-58.