



WE BELIEVE

Christmas Eve



DECEMBER 24, 2015
PASTOR BRAD
Inspired by Rev. Dawn Hutchings

There's a story I heard a while back that some of you might have heard before. But this is the night for telling stories over again, and because I fell in love with this story the minute I heard it, I'm going to tell it to you tonight! I'm not sure this story actually happened, but I can assure you – it is absolutely true!

It goes like this: once there was a little girl about three years old, who was the only child in her family. Her mom is pregnant, and this three-year-old girl is very excited about having a baby in the house.

The day comes where the mother-to-be delivered, and the mom and dad go off to the hospital. A couple of days later they come home with a new baby brother. And the little girl is just delighted. But after they've been home for a couple of hours, the little girl tells her parents that she wants to be with the baby in the baby's room, alone, with the door shut. She's absolutely insistent about the door being shut.

Well, you can imagine it kind of gives her folks the willies, right? They know she's a good little girl, but they've heard about sibling rivalry and they're not quite sure what they should do. Then they remember that they've recently installed an intercom system in anticipation of the arrival of the new baby, and they realize that they can let their little girl do this, and if they hear the slightest weirdness going on, they can be in there in a flash.

So they let their little girl go into the room. They close the door behind her, and they race to the listening post. They listen as her footsteps move across the room. They can imagine her now standing over the baby's crib, and then they hear her say to her two-day-old baby brother, "Tell me about God. I've almost forgotten."

That's us! Tonight that's us! We are all that child, standing over the baby's crib hoping against hope that the newborn baby will tell us about God; maybe because we've almost forgotten – maybe because we don't, or can't, believe – maybe because we really, really, want to believe – maybe because we've lost hope – maybe because we're endlessly curious – or maybe it's just because -- I don't know... 'Tis the season!

Regardless of the reason, here we all are, gazing into the crib at the newborn baby, hoping that this child will tell us about God. But all we have is this Nativity story – a story so simple and fantastic it sounds almost as though it was written for children:

Two poor refugees, far from home, in the dark of the winter's night, struggling to keep warm, surrounded by the "natural refuse" of a stable; a tiny baby, swaddled in what we can only imagine as rags lying in a feed trough, angels flying in and out, some shepherds, and a star shining in the night sky.

It's a lovely story. It's a story that warms our hearts, told over and over again in the darkness of many winters as we struggle to keep our demons at bay. We've told it so

often that we've forgotten why it was told in the first place. We've lugged so much of our own baggage into that stable that we can barely see the baby. We've heaped our expectations and yearnings onto the images, and our need to know has demanded that the facts confirm our desires.

So the experts, the historians, the archeologists, the theologians, astronomers, astrologers, physicians, physicists, and even clergy have been enlisted to corroborate the facts. Tell us about God, we demand – we've almost forgotten.

Tell us that there really was a star. Tell us it was Halley's comet, or that conjunction thingy between Venus and Jupiter or Saturn. Tell us that sometimes a virgin really can conceive. Tell us there really was a census. Identify the wise guys. Integrate the shepherds. Gather the evidence. We want the facts. Tell us about God. We've almost forgotten -- it's cold, and it's dark, and we are sore afraid.

We've almost forgotten why these stories were created in the first place. We've certainly forgotten who created them. We don't know their names so we call them Matthew and Luke. We're pretty sure the stories made the rounds before they were finally written down – some fifty or sixty years after Jesus of Nazareth walked the dusty roads of Judea. We know the stories are different from each other. And we know that there's no evidence that any of Jesus' contemporaries knew these stories. The apostle Paul never mentions them. The earliest gospel, the one we call Mark, never mentions these stories, and neither does the writer of the fourth Gospel, who we call John.

We do know that the details of these stories are strangely similar to the details of other ancient birth stories, like the stories of the births of Caesar Augustus, and Alexander the great.

Our efforts to historicize these stories have failed. We've tricked ourselves by our habit of literalizing the details, and the truth of their more-than-literal meaning has escaped us.

Our fears have almost caused us to forget the reality that these stories may not have happened exactly this way, but they are always happening this way. We've almost forgotten that the creators of these stories wrote them the way they wrote them for very particular reasons. They had a legacy to contend with; the legacy of a man who came along and changed everything.

Jesus of Nazareth had turned their world upside down. Jesus had challenged and changed the rules. Every once in a while, someone comes along who changes everything. In this constantly evolving creation we live in, there are times when the creatures who live here take a giant leap in a new direction. Someone or something happens upon the scene and the evolution of our species is shaped for a new kind of development. Jesus was that kind of event.

Jesus -- if not in person, at least the mythology around Jesus -- broadened the horizons of the people of the first century, and moved a large section of the population toward a new way of being in the world – a new way of living that began to break down tribal barriers; that called for a kind of peace that can't be achieved at sword point (or gunpoint); the kind of peace that only comes through justice.

Jesus challenged the religious rules and regulations, opening people up to a way of connecting to the sacred that spilled over and beyond the rules and regulations. Jesus embodied a way of being that not only rejected violence, challenging people not to hate, but beyond that to not even think about hating -- or killing their enemies. Jesus challenged people not just to love the loveable – that's easy! -- but to love your enemies, which is not.

Jesus embodied a way of being that rejected greed, by challenging people not to steal; but beyond that, to not even desire the things that aren't ours; and to give – give until everyone's needs are met.

Jesus embodied a way of being that embraced the poor, the outsider, the despised, the marginalized, and even the foreigner.

Jesus embodied a vision of the Divine One, as a God who refuses to be confined by religious authorities – who dwells in us, with us, through and beyond us.

Jesus lived and moved in the religious traditions of his people. He took them beyond the limitations of their visions of God, and opened them up to possibilities so earth shattering that his embodiment of the sacred actually threatened the status quo -- frightening the religious and political establishment. So, they killed him.

But Jesus' embodiment of the sacred wouldn't die – not in the hearts and minds of those whose lives had been opened to the possibilities of that new way of being. In Jesus, the world saw the fullness of human possibility – to make God visible in our lives. In Jesus the world came to see the Ultimate Reality, the One we call God, expressed in human form.

This is the legacy that the writers of the stories about Jesus' birth wanted the world to know about. They wrote it all down so that people would understand. They made the stories about his birth so simple that even children could understand.

And they wrote in the style of their time. They put in details that would alert their listeners to the revolutionary nature of the life of this man who embodied the divine so fully, so completely – who was so radically different than anyone they had ever known.

The radical nature of Jesus' challenges caused a shift in our evolution as a species. Our vision has been eternally expanded. Our hopes and dreams for justice, peace, compassion, and love were nourished and invigorated by the way Jesus embodied the sacred – the source and ground of our being – the One we call God.

Jesus gave us a wonderful expression of the Divine who lives and breathes, in, with, and through us. In Jesus, we have a vision of the Kingdom of God on earth -- as it is in Heaven. In Jesus, we can see the hope and the joy of living fully into our own humanity. We can see a glimpse of what it means to live abundantly -- to be all that we were created to be.

By Jesus' life and love, his openness to the sacred, and his embrace of his own humanity, Jesus challenges us all to love and live extravagantly. In his death, we are challenged to a kind of courage that scares us – the kind of courage that puts the love of our neighbor above our own desires – both friend and foe alike; above our greed, above our prejudices, and above our fears.

In Jesus' legacy, we are called to a new way of being that sees the sacred in the ordinary stuff of life – a way of being that cherishes creation, that is open to the possibilities of evolving into an even more gracious and loving human being – nourished, grounded, and sustained in life by the One who is the source of life, who lives and moves in and through us.

There have always been those people who are more than happy to tell you exactly what God is like, and what God thinks and feels. You can hear them on television, in the halls of academia, on the streets, from pulpits and soap boxes, and from the campaign trail. We hear them in our own homes and even in our own minds.

But tonight – tonight we've been given an amazing and enlightening vision of God. Standing over the crib, gazing at the baby... Hoping against hope that the child will tell us about God, because we have almost forgotten. Here in the vision handed down to us through the generations, we can see exactly what God is like.

God is like every mother's child; even a teenaged, unwed mother's child; even a poor and homeless mother's child. Our God looks like every mother's child so we don't have to forget. We only need to recognize the Spirit of God who lives in every child. Every life is sacred – yours, mine, even the lives of those we label as worth less – labeled poor, homeless, despised, even the lives of those we call enemies are sacred.

Our challenge, staring into the crib this night, gazing at the baby, is to remember the God in whom we live and move and have our being. To remember and to live fully, love extravagantly, and become all the we were created to be.

This and this alone will soothe the cries of all the babies, so that they can slumber in the peace of the One who is, was, and ever more shall be, the Holy One, Emmanuel – God with us!

Amen.