

Luke 2:8-11

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

“Why Did Joseph Have to Take A Number?”**Rev. Charles Schuster****December 7, 2008**

It isn't necessarily the best seat in the house, to be sitting in front of the big bells when they ring, first of all. Secondly, I did neglect to announce, and by doing it this way I emphasize, you can buy tickets for the Advent Dinner Theater, which is next Saturday, and the tickets are available in the Fellowship Hall or from Joel Kershaw or the church office this week. It's a wonderful event. Gourmet meal, wonderful event.

It is possible to tell a truth when what you say isn't exactly true. I'm not advocating that you lie. It just means that you're saying something more significant than the facts represent. For example, the first church I served alone, Thornton, Colorado, just outside Denver, every advent going back a number of years there was this man in the church, a young man, who volunteered to sing “Ave Maria,” and he would warble out this high-pitched, falsetto voice that seemed to be searching for the right note which he never found, and he would look up into the rafters of the sanctuary with a beatific gaze that seemed to be simulating a 6th-century saint, which he wasn't, and not infrequently would he have to stop and start over, sometimes, twice, and none of the start-overs were as good as the beginning. And it happened every advent on the fourth Sunday, and what was lacking in musicality, which was much, was made up for in sentimentality, which seemed to me to be contrived, and the congregation loved it. And I needed a job, and people would say to me, “You know, Chuck, every time Ron sings, it brings tears to my eyes.” And I could say it, and absolutely mean it, “It brings tears to my eyes as well.”

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Leo Rosten, a journalist, tells the story of Uri Smolenski, a Jewish engineer. It's before the fall of the Soviet Union, and he has been singled out and sent to Siberia, and he's packing, and his parents are upset. His mother is crying, and he says to her, “I'll write you every week,” and she says, “They'll censor every letter.” His father says, “I have an idea. Anything you write in black ink, we will know is true, anything you write in red ink, we will know is false.” That was the agreement. A month later, from Siberia, a letter, all of it in black ink. “Dear Mama and Papa, I can't tell you how happy I am here. It's a worker's paradise. They treat us like kings. I live in a fine apartment. The butcher always has fresh meat every day. There are many concerts to go to and there's a theater, and the movies are all free, and there's not one tiny bit of anti-Semitism. Love, Your son, Uri
P. S. The only one thing you can't find here is red ink.”

Sometimes if you want to tell a truth, you have to tell it in such a way that people will hear it, so you wrap the truth around a story. And sometimes when you tell a story, you

have to move things around so the story becomes more believable than if you told it straight. You have to tell it slant. The Christmas story is such a tale. If we tell it straight, if we spend our energy concerned about historicity, we will get lost in facts. The birth of the Christ child, the beauty of Christmas, requires that we tamper some with history, and tell it slant.

Raymond Brown is a Biblical scholar, and he has been able to sift through the historical record and has developed some insight concerning Jesus' birth, as told by Luke. He writes, "Historically, the setting for the birth of Jesus within the idea of a census decreed by a Caesar Augustus when Quirinius was the governor of Syria is fraught with problems. However, what Luke is trying to do is to set the Christian drama within the context of some well-known events. And Luke is not concerned to tell it as if it was exactly as he says it was. Luke says it as he imagined it to be, so we could begin to see it as it actually was." Which goes like this. Up in the heavens, Luke wants us to know all was well. Up in the heavens, God was confident that we could see it and understand it, the cosmic Christmas. The shepherds saw the bright light, and they were sore afraid, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them. Did you see the planets line up this week? Oh my goodness. The two little planets down here, and the half moon? It goes that way. Did you see that? Was God trying to tell us something?

Carl Sagan has never been known as religious in a formal sense. He spent a lot of his life attacking religion, because he believed that sometimes it was misapplied and it entered into areas it shouldn't have. But Carl Sagan looked at the pictures from the Hubble telescope and the Voyager space craft and he said, "We have not found even a trace of life. Therefore we are to be reminded of the rarity and preciousness of life on this Earth and our responsibility to preserve it. The heavens are telling us something." In our car, we have a little blue button. We can press it and a voice speaks from a satellite. It's up in the heavens, and it says, "Hello, Mr. Shusster, what can we do for you today?" Which is saying, "You're number one, the way we look at it." Some time I'm going to say, "It's pronounced 'Shooster'" and if I'm number one to you, you need to get that right," but so far I just speak appreciatively, and I say, "No, I don't really need anything, I've just got some people here in my car, and I'm testing this thing out. Just wanted to tell you people how much we appreciate you being up there." And they say, "Well have a good night." The heavens are telling us something.

We have many baptisms in the church. Most of them are here in the sanctuary, some of them are in the little chapel, and some of them are at the 11:30 service, we've baptized children there, congregations, and sometimes we do baptisms that involve just family and friends. I have colleagues, not currently, but in the past who say, "You shouldn't do private baptisms like that because it says it's got to be in a church congregation." Well, I've served a church that had as many people as sometimes just when the family and friends show up, and didn't Jesus say when two or three are gathered in my name, there's the church? Well, that's it.

When we get to the questions and I ask the parents, "Will you teach this child the value of worship?" then I say, "I'm talking about public worship in the sanctuary on a Sunday ?

morning. We want them to see that, and know what that is, as well as private worship in the wonder and beauty of nature. And when I've got a private baptism going on, I digress, I go on to say something like, "Will you take them fishing? Will you show your child what it means to walk in the rain on a summer day, and to jump into a puddle and make a mess? Will you let them catch a snowflake on their tongue, or make snow angels, or just stand and look up, far beyond the lights of the city? Just take them out of the lights of the city and let them see the diamonds against the black. And hope that maybe some day when you're with them, there'll be a meteor shooting right at you, and you feel like it's so close you duck." The heavens are telling the glory of God, and the worship of God is there. Let us show our children what that is.

Next Sunday the adult choir is going to sing Rutter's *Gloria*. They gave me twelve minutes, and they're going to sing this *Gloria*, and it'll be the cosmic Christmas. This week I did something I've needed to do for some time. I've been here five and a half years, that's a lot of Sundays for a preacher, and that's a lot of sermons. These sermons, they're crammed into that cabinet there, you did all that reorganization for me, and there's this cabinet and I crammed all the sermons in there. When I put one in, there'd be one that tried to escape. So I got them all out, and put them in some kind of order and marked them off, and then I stacked them, one on top of the other, and it reached 21 feet, five and a half years, 21 feet, that's seven yards, that's almost a first down. And I looked over the things I've been saying to you for five and a half years, and I came across something I really hadn't realized. It's sort of looking back seeing the forest instead of the trees, and it is a theology. It's a message that I think somewhat repeatedly I've tried to say, it's this. In God's eyes, we're Number One, and that means that much has been given to us, and that means that there's much that's expected of us. As I thought about it, it seems clear to me where I got the idea for this Christmas message, and it comes from Luke, what Luke has been trying to tell us in the story of Jesus' birth. God became one of us so that we might become one with God, because we're Number One. That's the way God wants it to be. That's the way it ought to be. That's the cosmic Christmas, and the heavens are telling it.

But there's another part of the story. How it ought to be and how it is. Luke had another message. In heaven, we're Number One, but on earth Joseph had to take a number, because Joseph and Mary didn't count. On earth, there's the chaotic Christmas. On earth, Luke wrote of a census, and there was no census, but the atmosphere was census-like. And there's no proof that Mary and Joseph made the trip to Bethlehem, but they were oppressed, they were mistreated, they were denied, because there was chaos in the land. There was, that's true. The Romans needed to control everything, and the Jews needed people to stand up to that control, and so they were caught between these two dueling powers. Are you coming or going? Should you stay or should you move? That's the chaos of Christmas, and it's the way it is.

Robert Orbin, his example of it in the neighborhood where he lives, he said, "I live in a very religious neighborhood. I asked a priest one time in this neighborhood, if you just carry a cross, will you be okay?" The priest looked at him and said, "Yes, you'll be fine if you carry a cross, but it does depend on how fast you carry it." Some of the current chaos

these days is financial. A third grade teacher asked her class, “Solve this math problem. You have 99 cents and your friend has 99 dollars, what’s the difference?” and one kid raised her hand and said, “The difference is a dismal point.” That’s the chaos of Christmas. For some of us, it’s a dismal point. For some of us it’s financial. I told you last week, those of you who were here, about Joan Uda and the book she wrote. She wrote a book entitled *At the Water’s Edge*, and I wrote her and congratulated her for the book. She’s written another one called *By the Water’s Edge 2*, and she sent me that one and a bill. She tells this story. She said, “When Lowell and I were in Denver,” she was in seminary and he was too, “when we were in seminary, we lived in a suburb of Denver, and just down the block there was this house that was all lit up for Christmas, and you’d see angels hovering, and you’d see elves and Mary and Joseph and magi and Santa Claus and Mrs. Claus and you’d see reindeer and Rudolph and you’d hear this music going on, and a thousand lights. And then the next Advent, there was nothing. And we found out from a neighbor, because somebody got in and stole their light display. What would you think? Would you expect people to steal a Christmas light display?” Since we have had cars broken into here at our church parking lot, we’ve decided to hire a security company to patrol our lots on Christmas Eve. You’d think that wouldn’t be necessary, but it is. There is the chaotic in Christmas, and, sadly, people are desperate.

Luke wants us to know that chaos was present when the Christ child was born. It was the worst of times when the best happened. Chaos is prelude to greatness. When it was the worst, it brings out the best. We advance in direct proportion to the number of times we fail but keep the faith. We thrive once we realize, if we survive, we’re still alive, and if we’re alive we have a chance to make the best out of the least. Luke wants us to know it was the darkest time of year when the Christ child was born. Nothing was going the way it should when the child came into the world to show us the way, and God was there incarnate, meeting us in the chaos saying, “I’m taking a chance on the human race, and when you think you’re just a number, remember, you’re Number One to me.” What about the future? Are you worried? God’s incarnate. What about your health or your marriage? What about the things you’ve done in the past you’ve got to live with, or what about the performance review that wasn’t so good, or what about the world, and the powers and principalities and the fears? Luke wants us to know how it was, chaotic Christmas. Luke wants us to know how it was meant to be, the cosmic Christmas.

And if we follow the story to the end, there is a catharsis, or we call it Communion. There’s the cathartic Christmas, where it all comes together, where there’s the bringing of the hopes and fears through the years, together. We could see it at the table. We call it Communion. We could call it catharsis. We could witness the bringing together of the cosmic and the chaotic. Caroline Kennedy in her book *A Family Christmas* tells us, “The powerful emotions of the holidays are not always easy to manage. Liturgy and literature teach us that Christmas encompasses the miraculous and the tragic, the profound and the ridiculous, and always represents a connection that we have to something bigger than ourselves.” It’s a bringing together. We’re Number One with God in heaven, but we take a number here on earth. The good and the bad, the hard and the soft. The joy and the sadness, heaven and hell.

Jesus tried to say it at the table. He broke the bread: "This is my body, but it's broken for you. Take it. This cup is the covenant in my blood. This is my blood, but it's shed for you. Drink it." That is bringing together the way God wishes life could be with the way life is, and if we take it into ourselves, maybe we can make the cosmos out of the chaos, so that all people are Number One, and no one has to take a number. At Communion. But Jesus said it better than that, and the church repeats it, and the Christian church repeats it every Sunday. Communion is once a month, but every Sunday, in remembrance of the man who as a child was said to have been born in Bethlehem, in congregations all over the world, in languages proper to the place where it is spoken, Christians pray a prayer that begins, "Our father, who are in heaven, hallowed be your name," and includes these words, "Your will be done, your kingdom come" and then, "on earth as it is in heaven." On earth as it is in heaven. The chaotic, the cosmic, the cathartic. Bringing it all together. And our job is to narrow the gap just a little, between how it's supposed to be, how it's supposed to be and how it is.