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Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C Christmas 2
December 29, 2024

“...The secret of the Great Stories is that they *have* no secrets. The Great Stories are the ones you have heard and want to hear again. The ones you can enter anywhere and inhabit comfortably. They don’t deceive you with thrills and trick endings. They don’t surprise you with the unforeseen. They are as familiar as the house you live in. Or the smell of your lover’s skin. You know how they end, yet you listen as though you don’t. In the way that although you know that one day you will die, you live as though you won’t. In the Great Stories you know who lives, who dies, who finds love, who doesn’t. And yet you want to know again.

That is their mystery and their magic.”

Arundhati Roy’s observation from her novel *The God of Small Things* resonates still: This is a season of stories.

Stories of kindness and unexpected joy and gifts and “true gifts” and miracles populate whatever media feed we tap into in this season, be it the newspaper, the Facebooks or whatever streaming service is your cup of tea. We reread our Christmas storybooks to children with a familiar rhyme and tempo, because the ‘stockings were hung by the chimney with care, *in the hopes that St Nicholas soon would be there*’.¹

We tell the stories of the season over the dinner table with one another; our tales of finding the perfect tree, or purchasing gifts, or the ubiquitous commentary on the busyness of this time of the year. We spend our energy ensuring that Mary and Gabriel’s costumes fit, and hope that no one throws up during the pageant.

We get so caught up in the narrative plot of Christmas sometimes that we miss the great story: the story we’ve heard so often that we tend to forget it’s radical message; the story which sometimes feels overtold by the actual night of Christmas, and yet as soon as that discordant

¹ *’Twas the Night Before Christmas*—a “fun fact” about Clement Clarke Moore, the author of the children’s book, was a devout Episcopalian and scholar of Hebrew. He donated a large portion of his property in Chelsea (Manhattan) to house the General Theological Seminary. To date, the evening before Christmas break (just kidding, seminarians aren’t usually ‘off’ on Christmas!), the Dean of the Seminary hosts the students for cookies and hot chocolate and reads this tale out loud annually.

chord in *O come all ye faithful* echoes among strangers gathered together—"Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing"-- we crave hearing it once again.²

And it is the gift of the season of Christmas—beginning on Christmas Eve amid the chaos of stars and choirs of angels and extending until the visit of the Magi on Epiphany—that we, once again, get to hear the story of who we are; what we are; why we are. The Great Story.

Today's Gospel of John isn't about confused shepherds; it doesn't concern itself with whether Jesus was born in a inn or in a guest room—a verified topic of energetic conversation among your clergy, by the way!³; it does not involve stars or heavenly hosts; not one miraculous birth occurs. John's Gospel eschews plot for message: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

This is the beginning of our Great Story. That the Word became flesh and moved into the neighborhood, as The Message interpretation⁴ tells us. That in the beginning, we were not alone. That in the beginning, we were beloved. That in the beginning, we, at our core, were made for something more than plot twists and thrill rides—we were, we ARE, grafted into the great meta-story of incarnate love and accompaniment. God became human and lived right here, right now, among us.

Those same sources of all of the holiday feel-good personal-interest stories, and curated photos of lit trees and holiday cheer—those same sources will inevitably tire of hope and populate any and all feeds with fear and disappointment and distress—and they will do it just as quickly as Christmas trees are deconstructed, and set out on the curb by the evening of December 26th. There is more than enough to worry about, and more than enough ways to be reminded every moment of every day of every single one of them. Joy, like eggnog, is clearly a seasonal product.

Which is why—if we focus only on the narrative and not the arc of God's presence—we, too, will discover that the incarnation is nothing more than another Hallmark movie—essentially interchangeable with one another, provoking a sentimentality which satiates rather than love

² Also known as "The Chord". I've loved this particular moment in our Christmas liturgies from forever, but only discovered the story behind it in 2022—so yes, you'll hear me reference it again and again: <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/12/21/arts/music/o-come-all-ye-faithful-christmas-chord.html>

³ There is a new revision to the New Revised Standard Version, known as the NRSVUE: NRSV Updated Edition (how many times can we state that it's been updated)—in 'there was no room for them in the inn' has been recast as 'no room for them in the guest room', which tracks historically (it wasn't a cozy B&B), but also evokes other images, and we have too much fun thinking about this all together.

⁴ The Message is not a translation of scripture—it is, by the Peterson's own admission, an interpretation. That doesn't mean it doesn't hold merit when it comes to the breadth and depth of enlivening the intent of the Bible, it just doesn't hold itself accountable to the stringent interpretations and contextualization which comes with biblical interpretation and exegesis. The whole introduction to the Gospel of John is fascinating and deserves a read: <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=John%201&version=MSG>

which empowers. It will become time-bound, expiring just as soon as another trend—or upcoming holiday ripe for purchase power-- moves in.

There are stories we all hear over and over again and tire of—either because they are well-worn and over-trod, or because they are plot driven only—their primary value is getting from one place to the next as quickly and efficiently as possible.

But the story of being loved so much by the God of eternity—the God who was and is and is to come—the God who was before all things and beyond our endings—the God who chose to limit Godself by descending into humanity and adopting us and our plot-obsessed-squirrel-like-Christmas-lobster-shilling-attention-spans simply because of love—of hope—of deep belief in *us* and the prospect of our redemption—friends, this is a story we could listen to all day, every day.

From the beginning, you were loved. From the deepest part of God, you each were created. From the one who was before time and will be beyond time, God is present here, now, in this room and outside in the traffic, and waiting for the bus, because that is the God who authors our Great Story—the one tale our hearts long to hear as many times as we can stand, schmaltz aside—the story that love, indeed, is everywhere, because God, indeed, is now part of this strange human existence.

May we—even as the world closes down their Christmas hope for the year, often with it all at 50% clearance—may we never tire of this story; may we continue to sense it's mystery and magic even as we recite along with two thousand years of Christians and hear—and believe—once again as if for the first time: “In the beginning was the Word; *and the Word was with God; and the Word was God.*”

Amen.