

Some stories are meant to be read and heard over and over and over again. When my daughter, Claire, was very young, Cathie or I would read her a bedtime story each night. We went for a period of several months, although at the time it seemed like several years, when every night upon asking Claire to select the story she wanted read she produced the same story from the same book. She insisted upon hearing night after night, week after week, the story of the “Twelve Dancing Princesses.” Despite our best efforts at persuading her to try a different story for a change, Claire was insistent, it must be the “Twelve Dancing Princesses.” To this day, Cathie and I still grimace at even the thought of ever having to read through that story one more time. But the story obviously was a comfort to Claire at that time in her life, and that was what mattered.

On this eve of Christmas, we have heard another story that is a source of enduring comfort to many people, me included, and I hope to you as well. It is Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. To my mind, it is a story meant to be read and heard over and over and over again.

I am certain that I am not the only one among us tonight who feels something of an emotional rush each Christmas upon hearing the story’s opening line: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” By the time the Nativity story has ended twenty verses later with the announcement that “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them,” we have become reacquainted with the news that Jesus has been born. It was the most monumental world-altering birth in all human history. A birth that, although it occurred 2,000 years ago, continues to shape my world and my life today, as it does yours.

Christmas is a time of traditions: individuals, families, churches, communities, all create and celebrate their own Christmas traditions. Some Christmas traditions, such as reading Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus, have a Christian focus; most others do not, but we embrace them all the same, don’t we? Take a moment and think about your most cherished Christmas traditions. What are they, and what makes them so meaningful to you? Are you able to experience those traditions again this year? How has the pandemic interfered with those traditions, both last Christmas, and now?

The shepherds that Luke wrote about in the Nativity story have long occupied an important place in Christian Christmas traditions. That might seem a bit surprising, given that socially speaking, those shepherds were “nobodies.” They would have been poor, illiterate, and uncouth. Shepherds were rough and ready characters who alternated between drinking strong wine and uttering colorful curses. They stank like the sheep in their care and were no cleaner. Their days and nights were spent keeping watch over their flock, protecting them from two-legged and four-legged marauders. Night after night, they slept in the fields. On cold evenings, they would light a fire, huddling together to keep warm. As spring approached, they would be on hand for the lambing season, ready to help with a difficult delivery and to keep predators at bay.

The shepherds' lives were rote, predictable, and unchanging when suddenly and completely unpredictably one night their reality was shattered by an angelic vision that they could not possibly have understood completely at the time, and that Christian believers have been challenged to explain ever since. How amazed those shepherds must have been when they found themselves bathed in heavenly light. How terrified they must have become when the angel entrusted them with the Good News, sending them on their way to find the newborn Christ child.

I wonder what ever became of those shepherds, after their angelic vision; after travelling to Bethlehem to meet the newborn child; after they had returned to their fields. Those shepherds, the riffraff of society, were the first witnesses of the Savior's birth, the first to bend their knees in praise and to join their voices to the heavenly chorus. I wonder what became of them.

Did they revert to life as usual with their humdrum existence of keeping watch over their flocks, or had they been changed in some meaningful way by the experience of seeing the Christ Child? Did they suddenly find that they had nothing in common with their families and friends, but could only relate to others who had been with them in the fields that eventful evening? Would anyone else even have believed their stories of angel voices and a special baby? Had the experience sparked within them a burning desire to dwell in the presence of God. We will never know.

The only thing we can say for certain is how we are affected and changed by the story of the Christ's birth. I ask you, do you believe that you have been changed, or will be changed in some meaningful way by the birth of the Christ child?

-that is the question that thoughtful Christians need to answer for themselves at Christmas

-have I been, or will I be changed in some meaningful way by the birth of the Christ child?

Reading and hearing all over again Luke's telling of the Nativity is one Christmas tradition we have just observed together. Another essential holiday tradition, including many households where Christ's birth holds no meaning, is selecting and decorating a Christmas tree.

In Eugene Peterson's family, the Christmas tree was closely linked to their Christian beliefs and practices. Peterson died three years ago at the age of 85, after a long and fruitful career as a clergyman, theologian, author, and poet. When he was a youngster, it was his family's annual tradition to cut down a tree from the nearby forest, bring it home, and decorate it with multicolored lights and gold and silver ornaments. Looking back many years later, Peterson recalled his pride at how beautiful his family's Christmas tree always looked. When compared with the neighbors' trees, his family's trees were always the most impressive.

But he also vividly recalls the Christmas of 1940, when he was eight years old, as the year there was no tree in his home. That year, Peterson's mother, whom he described as "an intense woman capable of fierce convictions," came across a passage in the Old

Testament book of the prophet Jeremiah (10:2-4) which she interpreted as a message from God warning against the Christmas tree tradition. This is what the passage in Jeremiah stated: “Do not learn the way of the nations ... for the customs of the peoples are false: a tree from the forest is cut down and worked with an ax. ... people deck it with silver and gold ...” Whereupon the decorated tree, according to Jeremiah, was venerated by the people as an idol, thereby offending God. After reading the passage from Jeremiah, Peterson’s mother concluded there would be no more pagan symbols like a Christmas tree corrupting her family and home.

This was neither the first nor unfortunately the last time that someone applying a literal reading of Holy Scripture arrived at a ridiculous interpretation. Nevertheless, to her credit Peterson’s mother believed the authority of Scripture must take precedence over cultural observances and so that year no Christmas tree was permitted in the family home. Instead, where the Christmas tree normally stood, she placed a table and on it her Bible opened to Luke’s account of the Nativity story that we just read. There were no glittery decorations with their corrupting influence to be found in the Peterson home that year.

As you might imagine, young Eugene was deeply humiliated by his family’s unanticipated rejection of so important and visible a tradition as the Christmas tree. He fretted over how his friends in the neighborhood would react. Would they think the Petersons were too poor to afford a tree? The eight-year-old wondered if being denied a Christmas tree was punishment from God for some unspeakable sin he had unknowingly committed. Eugene was concerned that neighbours might consider themselves superior to his family. But most of all, he worried that the neighbours would discover the real reason the Peterson’s did not have a Christmas tree, which was his mother’s recent belief that God condemned the practice.

Christmas came and went that year as it does every year, and Eugene’s youthful life returned to normal. The following year, 1941, his family once again and every year thereafter cut down and decorated a tree for Christmas. The annual tradition was restored without his mother ever explaining why she no longer felt bound by her interpretation of Jeremiah’s prohibition on tree decorating. Many more years passed, and it was only after his mother had died that Peterson saw a connection between his treeless Christmas of 1940 and the story of Christ’s birth that Luke tells so well, rendering it a story to be experienced over and over and over again.

Peterson had come to realize – and this is my point for telling you his story on Christmas Eve – he realized that the feelings of humiliation and being misunderstood in the neighbourhood because of his family’s rejection of a widely accepted Christmas tradition during that treeless Christmas gave him a little insight into how Mary and Joseph might have felt.

Although in their minds Mary and Joseph were following the will of God, how could they expect anyone else to understand much less accept their strange story about the true identity of their son Jesus? Would not everyone they knew dismiss their claim as delusional? It took Peterson many years to make the connection, but eventually he was thankful that his mother had given him his first taste of the sacrifices and dilemmas that can arise when a person attempts to be true to their Christian beliefs. As an adult, Peterson was able to

say to his deceased mother, “Thank you for taking away the Christmas tree the winter when I was eight years old. And thank you for giving it back the next year.”

This Christmas, take some time to recall stories from your Christmases past. Your Christmas stories that should be told and remembered over and over and over again. Search inside those stories for lessons about life, and love, and faith, and goodness, and peace, that God in God’s quiet and subtle way might have been trying to communicate to you then and now. And be thankful; thankful, as Luke wrote, that for you – for you – is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Merry Christmas everyone. **Amen.**

Christmas Eve

24 December 2021

Rev. Dr. Keith Fleming