

Christmas Eve 2020

Luke 2:1-20

It was a beautiful afternoon,
Two days ago,
Though if you looked to the west it was clear
The weather was about to change.

But taking hold of the last light,
We stepped out with the dog,
Just to walk around the neighborhood
For a little while.

The enormous blowup decorations
Were springing to life –
Those that don't stay up all day –
Grinches and reindeer and snowmen.
Lights were coming on early;
Christmas trees were shining through the windows.

So many of us are lighting candles against the dark,
Wondering whether to try to make it the same,
Or reach for something new,
Or just hunker down and wait for it to be over.
What is Christmas, this year?

We walked along, stepping far away from neighbors,
Giving everyone plenty of room,
So as to keep up the pretense that we don't all share the same air.
We were marveling at the splendor and variety
Of decorations.

And then, as the dog paused
To sniff something especially aromatic,
We spied a tiny little tree,
Sagging under the weight of one red ball,
with a blue blanket
Wrapped around its crossed plywood base.

Some memory floated up
From far away,
And I exclaimed,
Look! It's Charlie Brown's Christmas tree!

This is a thing,

And I didn't know it.
But of course
A Charlie Brown Christmas tree
is the ideal symbol for this year.

Heartwarming, pathetic,
Poignant, and yes,
Even in some way,
Powerful.

You can, of course,
Make your own Charlie Brown tree,
As my neighbors seem to have done.
You can go online,
And get a plastic copy of Charlie Brown's tree,
Or a giclee print
Of a beautiful woodcut of Charlie Brown's tree,
Or a musical version.
I thought it would play, O Christmas tree,
But no,
It plays the iconic Linus and Lucy theme.

You can, one ad promises,
Tap into the nostalgic spirit
With your artificial Charlie Brown tree.
Good grief!
Except that it's true.
That little copy of a long ago cartoon
Brought me pleasure, and then a few tears,
And then, deep satisfaction.

Overcome with nostalgia –
And just possibly procrastinating –
I decided, as I sat down to write out this text,
To pay an online visit to Charlie Brown and Linus,
And the tree,
On the school stage,
And hear again
What Christmas is all about.

What is Christmas all about?
We have said, and thought,
And known in our hearts for months now,
That this Christmas would be different.

For some, it's lonely.

For some, it's the first season of heartbreak.
For some, it's frustrating,
Or fearful.
For some,
To tell the truth,
It's not all that different,
As long as the dark is kept back
With lights, and presents, and carols.

But it is different.
As different from our ideal
As the Charlie Brown tree
Is from the tall, straight, fragrant fir tree
Lit with a hundred candles,
Circled by a happy throng of family and friends
Dancing in a ring,
Singing, unmasked and jubilant,
Sharing tidings of comfort and joy.

That ideal Christmas speaks to our hearts.
For some, it's a memory,
For others, a dream.
For all of us,
It's unattainable this year.

And that, for all the sadness,
Gives us an opportunity to wonder,
What is Christmas all about?

Linus, of course, as usual,
Knows what it's all about.
He stands there, alone on the stage,
In the weak spotlight, and begins to recite:

There were, in the same country,
Shepherds, abiding in the fields,
Keeping watch over their flocks by night.

And lo! An angel of the Lord came upon them,
And the glory of the Lord shone round about them,
And they were sore afraid.
And the angel said unto them,
Fear not.

Fear not.
Nothing can take away

These tidings of great joy,
Which are for everyone.
Everyone.

Let's pretend, for a moment,
That this story happens now.
Let's notice
That the angel comes to shepherds.
They are the essential workers of their time.
Exposed to every danger,
Living from paycheck to paycheck,
Dependent on the will
Of those who look down on them
And would rather they were invisible,
Would rather forget they are there.

The essential invisible workers
are the ones who hear the good news,
And find the baby,
Lying in the manger,
And share the story.

They are the ones who see the glory,
Shining all around them.
They are the ones who return,
Glorifying God
as they take what they have heard and seen
into their hearts.

There is no Christmas without the shepherds,
The essential workers,
Then or now.
There is no Christmas without the shepherds,
And the glory.

What is glory?
It is impossible to define,
Or describe,
And yet
It is the essence of the story.

Without the glory,
There is no Christmas.
We cannot make glory,
Or capture it.
We cannot buy it or wrap it or give it.

We can only accept it.
And – we can point to it,
Knowing we have no words for it.

Without the glory,
There is no Christmas,
Because, in the end,
The glory is the mystery of Christmas.
The blaze of life,
The waterfall of love
That is the heart of all things,
Takes the shape and size,
The being of a baby,
And sets itself in the straw,
Utterly dependent on some well-meaning,
Fumbling people
A lot more like us than we like to imagine.
We like to think Mary and Joseph were like the tall splendid fir tree,
But really, just like us,
They were Charlie Brown Christmas trees.

And that's the glory
Of Christmas.
A young girl and an old man
Do their best to keep a surprise baby warm and safe.
Shepherds hear the news,
And run to see the wonder.
They find the glory of God,
The elusive, fleeting brilliance
That is the heart of all things.
It overcomes them,
And changes their lives.
They return to their fields and flocks,
And keep doing what they have to do,
But life is transformed by the glory
That shone around them,
And the song of angels.

Maybe it can be the same for us.
We have to keep on doing what we have to do,
To get through these times.
And yet,
Because Christmas is real, and true,
Everything can be transformed for us,
Again, right now.
The glory of the heavens

Is lying in the straw,
And everyone can come and see,
Starting with the least among us,
And working around,
Finally, to the great.
The glory is for everyone.

The glory that is beyond us
Will come to us,
And abide with us,
This year as every year.
The glory streams down from heaven
Every Christmas,
In times of war and times of peace,
In times of famine and disaster,
And yes,
In times of plague –
All the times of plague that have gone before,
And the times that will come after this.

The glory streams from heaven
And brings the good news
That we will never comprehend,
But can always accept.

That's what Christmas is all about.
Sometimes it's not the splendid that shows it best.
Sometimes it's the small, and weak,
And left over,
Where the glory is found.

Look around, this Christmas.
See where,
In this year we didn't choose,
The glory of God is lying in the straw.
Fear not.
The good news has come.