

No more fairy tales!

Isaiah 11:1-10

December 9, 2007

Christmas is coming! Christmas is coming in two weeks and two days. But you knew that! You've been getting ready for Christmas for a long time already.

You've been making your lists, and checking them twice.

You've put up your Christmas tree and the Christmas lights -- haven't you? My son had his tree up before Thanksgiving!

You're baking Christmas cookies and making peanut brittle or at least thinking about Christmas cookies and peanut brittle!

You're watching the calendar to make sure you get the packages and the cards out on time.

And you've circled December 23 on your calendar to make sure you don't forget to join us for caroling!

We celebrate Christmas like we celebrate no other holiday. It's the big one. We give gifts on other holidays, but on Christmas we give gifts not just to one or two of the people closest to us, but to a wide circle of friends and relatives, and even to the guy who delivers the newspaper.

On other holidays, we may display a few decorations -- pumpkins or gourds or corn stalks or flags -- but on Christmas we redecorate the whole house. More than half our attic space is filled with boxes of Christmas stuff!

Christmas has its own musical repertoire -- carols and songs and oratorios.

And Christmas is a time to connect with people. We travel to be with family and friends. We attend Christmas parties with coworkers and neighbors. We send cards to folks with whom we have little or no contact during the rest of the year.

We celebrate Christmas like we celebrate no other holiday. Why is that? What makes Christmas such a big deal?

Well, certainly the US economy has a vested interest in making it a big deal! And we play along, spending more than we should, caught up in the excitement of giving and getting. But that doesn't explain it all, does it? There is something else, something more, about Christmas that stirs our hearts. It's not just about the stuff, but about something deeper and less tangible.

It's about the Christmas spirit, the spirit of giving, a wake-up call to our better selves, our more generous selves; a time even in the dead of winter, in the midst of the season of scarcity, to show that we have enough to share; a time to make our invisible loves visible, and not just our love for our immediate families, but a broader love that embraces even strangers.

It's about bringing light into the darkness. In the dead of winter when the days are short and darkness seems to consume the earth, we hang lights inside and outside and

light candles to comfort us and remind us that our lives are still filled with light. And in the dead of winter when all seems dull and gray and lifeless, we decorate our doors and mantles and tabletops with wreaths and greens and holly to keep the deadness at bay and remind us that despite appearances, we and the earth are still alive. Christmas is very much a winter holiday, a time to renew joy and hope and warmth in the midst of the darkness and bleakness and cold of winter.

And Christmas is about "peace on earth," a time when we are eager to set aside conflict and to find a place of stillness and quiet and reconciliation, even if just for a moment.

Lynne and I watched a movie on the Hallmark Channel the other day. I can't remember the name of the movie, but Linda Hamilton was the featured star. The movie was set during World War II. A small group of American soldiers and a handful of German soldiers stumble upon the cabin she, a German citizen, shares with her young son in the midst of a thick forest. They come seeking shelter during a severe blizzard. She lets them stay the night -- Christmas night -- but only on the condition that they bring no weapons into the house. They share a scrounged meal and some gifts from what they have on hand amidst their gear and leave the next morning as changed people with a new appreciation for each other and for their common humanity. The premise of the movie is perhaps farfetched, but in this season, it is what we want, it is what we hope for. We hope and dream of peace. *The hopes and dreams of all the years ...*

And, for us, those hopes and dreams are hinged on a child, on the story of the birth of a child. Birth is possibility. Birth is newness -- the possibility of a new way, a new age, a new world, a new hope. And so we celebrate this birth. We adore this child and cling to the sense of hopefulness the story of his birth brings to us.

Once upon a time, there was a young peasant couple. Their names were Joseph and Mary. They did not have much and they had no children, but a heavenly messenger came to them and told them they would have a baby who would grow up to be a mighty king. What the messenger told them did come to pass. They had a baby and named him Jesus and people came from far and wide, from all walks of life, to pay him homage. And they all lived happily ever after!

Is that the way we tell it? Like a fairy tale? Like a fairy tale told to bring courage and hope in the face of dire threat, symbolized by witches or wolves or evil stepmothers ... or evil kings? Like a fairy tale told to bring courage and hope in the face of injustice and unfairness, like Cinderella or the Ugly Duckling ... or the Jews under the rule of the Roman Empire? Like a fairy tale that brings us delight by taking us, if just for a moment, out of this frightening and disturbing world and putting us into a world of magic and infinite possibility?

And if that is the way we tell it -- like a fairy tale -- what's wrong with that?

Fairy tales warn us: *Don't wander off the path ... Be careful what you say to a stranger ... Beware of grandmothers with big teeth!*

Fairy tales encourage positive moral development: bravery and valor, responsibility and good sense, self-esteem and hopefulness.

And fairy tales lift sagging spirits.

So what's wrong with that? Only this: we know a fairy tale is a fairy tale. We don't confuse a fairy tale with reality. We don't expect to marry a prince or turn into a swan or slay a dragon ... or live happily ever after. We take delight in the story, but when the story is ended, we get back to business, back to the business of our real lives. In the real world, fairy godmothers will not come to our rescue. We are left to do the best we can, left to our own resources.

Once -- not upon a time, but just once. Once, at a particular time, during the reign of Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, once, in a particular place, Bethlehem in occupied Judea, a baby was born to a poor Jewish couple, Mary and Joseph, a carpenter. They were not yet married and the pregnancy was conceived under dubious circumstances and the birthing was lonely and awkward. No one came to share their joy, only some rough shepherds and a group of foreigners. From the beginning, this baby was surrounded by turmoil. Herod wanted to kill him, but failed. But one day, Pilate would succeed. He was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, rejected and despised by his own people, but providing for some -- hopeless people, broken people, poor people, humble people, sinful people, lost people -- the salvation they thought was never possible.

The story of Jesus' life is no fairy tale, and it has no fairy tale ending. It's not about taking us to another world, but about him coming into our world, not about escape, but about transformation. It's about good news to the poor, liberty to captives, freedom for the oppressed. It's about peace on earth ...

*Wolves and sheep will live together in peace,
and leopards will lie down with young goats.
Calves and lion cubs will feed together,
and little children will take care of them.
Cows and bears will eat together,
and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.*

Now that sure sounds like a fairy tale, doesn't it? But think about it! What happens to wolves in fairy tales? And if you are a sheep, is this what you hope for and dream about, a world where you and the wolves are lying down together? You want a world where wolves get their just desserts, a world entirely rid of wolves! But that's a fairy tale ...

In the real world, peace is elusive, but when it does come, when Jesus brings it, it comes through transformation. Swords are beaten into plows, and spears into pruning knives ... and wolves and sheep become friends. Disputes among great nations are settled and enemies are reconciled, because people walk in a new light, because people follow a new way, because people acknowledge a new king, a king who rules with justice and integrity, a king who leads with wisdom and with faithful obedience to the will of the Lord.

This story is no fairy tale. And when this story is ended ... But wait! This story does not end! Once we have heard and embraced this story, we don't get back to business, we start a new business. We are not left to our own resources, we draw on the limitless resources of the grace of God. We do not taste the flavor of peace for a moment, but pursue the way of peace for a lifetime.

This is no fairy tale! *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth ...*