

“Christmas In July”

Isaiah 11:1-9 John 1:1-5, 14-18

The nativity window regularly reinforces both the simplicity and power of the Gospel story, how God accommodates Himself to us by becoming one of us in the Christ child.

Our stained glass windows are some of the finest sacred art in all of Florida if not all of the United States. On Sundays I enjoy arriving at the chancel a tad early to watch newcomers especially take in the power of the Resurrection window. Willet-Hauser architectural glass can add the Moorings to an already impressive list of creations: The Princeton University Chapel, The National Episcopal Cathedral, First Presbyterian Church of Dallas, TX. Bryn Mawr Presbyterian in Pennsylvania, the National Presbyterian Church in D.C. The Peachtree United Methodist Church in Downtown Atlanta. As I have said before, I hope we never become so accustomed, so used to them that we take them for granted. We are incredibly blessed not just by their beauty, but by the story they tell, the Gospel they proclaim. They are more than a pretty rendition – their scenes influence us, shaping our faith if we let them – by reinforcing the story of what we believe. I sometimes wander in here in the late afternoon, catching the light setting on the western windows. In the early morning witnessing sunlight dance on the walls – like the scene in the Nutcracker Suite when the children wake up in the middle of the night to find their toys taking on a life of their own. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus was right... the logos is more perceptible to the eye than the ear.

For the next few weeks I invite you to join me in completing the sermon series we began last summer... when we traveled along the western row and concluded with the central or Resurrection window. Today we turn our attention to the eastern set... beginning with Christ’s nativity and concluding with His ascension August 2. Together they do tell a story. The story of our salvation. I am inspired when I think that 100 years from now they will still stand as a reminder of what and in whom we believe.

Our stop for today is the nativity window. It was the first one to be installed more for practical reasons than theological ones. At first glance there is little to surprise you. Mother Mary. Infant Jesus. Solicitous Joseph. Charlie Lawrence, the artist and designer has the light falling from the star in geometric precision compared to the way light falls in most of the other windows. The star itself is almost an afterthought in comparison to the descending rays of light. Mary is serene – almost too serene for one who has recently given birth. The infant Jesus sleeps, as if in slumber he is getting ready for His life of endless love. And Joseph is at the ready, on standby.

But look closely, Mary’s hands like most of the other hands are larger than scale. With one she covers her heart and the other she appears to be reaching to her child. The look on her face is contemplation. Does she know something the rest of us don’t? Echoes of her magnificat (Luke 1:46) still ring in her memory... a song of hope amidst a restless, suffering generation. Her face is loving and loyal – not unlike the face I imagine in the window we will examine in 2 weeks, His crucifixion. If we look carefully, we see her as the parent we know her to be... unwavering, holy, steadfast.

Then there is Joseph. If Charlie Lawrence were here I would ask him if he had an agenda in making Joseph larger than usual. Most nativity scenes portray him in the background, playing a lesser role. But, here he is in our window, standing tall, holding a lamp of all things – as if he were assisting the star, helping it to shine. Nowhere in scripture do I read that Joseph holds a lamp, so I am left to imagine Charlie adding it due to some belief or restlessness about Joseph, his face is hard to read. His expression neither extremely happy nor extremely sad. He is just there, with eager hands, holding the light while Jesus sleeps.

What is this window trying to tell us? What word from the Lord longs to be told? I look at this portrayal of the first Christmas and it is more than simply a pretty rendition, a sentimental description of a particular birth. There is something powerful in the story... not just improbable, but powerful in that a child from an unlikely source serves as the human face of God. Born just as you and I were born. Needing comfort and warmth just as you and I need comfort and warmth. Requiring sleep, just as you and I require sufficient slumber. If you look at this nativity window long enough you will begin to see the compelling story of the incarnation, a story not bound by December alone, but a timeless story which never gets old. The way God speaks to us ultimately is through another human being. Through a child like us.

John Calvin, whose 500th birthday was this past Friday, summarized the incarnation of God this way: God is forever accommodating Himself to our limited understanding. I look at this nativity window and conclude: God is forever being born amongst us as sons and daughters. In the births of babies. In grandchildren. In those whom God created imago-dei. In the image of God.

About thirty years ago, our family was rushing through O'Hare airport, late for a plane. Our three children were all under five and doesn't it always happen that the later you are, the more likely that one is going to pitch a fit or two are going to start a fight, or some other calamity will stand between you and your appointed departure. There we were, looking frantic needing six arms each to be able to manage luggage, diaper bags, and children. The more we rushed, the more behind we got. The airport was crowded with holiday travelers, themselves in a hurry to reach their appointed destinations.

It was at a moment when we were about to lose our composure that a big, brawny airport employee took pity on us. With a voice like James Earl Jones, he stopped to help. He grabbed one of these handy luggage carriers that someone had abandoned, picked up our oldest son asking "what's your name?" Abraham. With all the trustworthiness in the world, he placed Abe on the seat and declared, "world, this is Abraham, you're gonna grow up and be somebody someday!" He didn't realize that in helping us he served as an ambassador of the divine in a world of hurried humanity. He didn't realize that entering our frenzy with his deep voice of assurance, he was a Christ – figure in every way. He didn't realize how he was the incarnation of Christ – like love and good will. The incarnation of Christian love we needed at that moment. He reminded us what we were prone to forget. Life is sacred and God is there.

Thank God that we can't remove this nativity window once the Christmas season is over. It is here year round as a reminder that Christmas, its power and beauty is a year round reality. Thank God that this nativity window is as bright in July as it is in December. I believe that if we fail to appreciate what it conveys in the heat and humidity of July, we will be unable to appreciate what it conveys on Christmas Eve. In the vulnerable form of a child, God accommodates Himself to human beings, getting through to us in ways we can understand. We could say it this way, "The nativity window is a reminder of how God breaks down the last barrier between us and Himself. God has become one of us..." in order to reveal His unending love. All of the other windows would be missing something without this solemn rendition of His birth. A contemplative Mary, a helpful Joseph holding a lamp even if it is unnecessary, a child sleeping as if to prepare for the costly life He would lead, the costly love He would give. Ultimately, it's not about what we must do, it is about what God has done, is doing, and will do again – be born for us in order to save us!

On Christmas Eve 1818 the church organ in the village church of Oberndorf, Austria wasn't working. It was emitting only a wheezy whisper. The repairman was still a couple weeks away. There would be no organ for Christmas worship. The bad news affected two people profoundly. The 31 year old church organist, Franz Gruber had worked hard rehearsing the village choir for the midnight service. To ask them to sing the elaborate chorales unaccompanied by the organ was out of the question. Equally distressed was the 25 year old Pastor Joseph Mohr. Joseph had only recently been ordained. He had dreamed of making this Christmas celebration special, as glorious as it deserved. But, his dreams were fading quickly. December 24th and no church organ!

The new priest did own a guitar, even though it was a poor substitute on this Holy night. If only there were a melody simple enough for a guitar to carry alone, with words to capture the holiness of Christmas. Father Joseph began to write, his quill pen moving quickly across the page. It was the afternoon of Christmas Eve when he showed the poem to the organist Franz Gruber. Could Franz set the words to a melody for the guitar? Franz would try.

The choir was assembling by the time he finished. It was too late to teach them the whole piece. So the priest and organist rehearsed the song as a duet. Later at the service the congregation was deeply disappointed to find their organ mute. They were also disappointed to hear only their new priest's tenor voice along with the bass voice of their organist singing a song to the plucking of a guitar. But, as they sang, the words and tune began to catch on. Many in the congregation were humming it as they left the church service. They were still humming it when the man who repaired the organ arrived. He liked their new hymn so much that he committed it to memory, playing and singing it in other churches as he repaired other church organs. Joseph Mohr and Franz Gruber never realized how the song they had created the night the organ failed was to become the world's most famous Christmas Carol: "Silent Night, Holy Night".

Who would know how God could act in the Bethlehem child? Who would know how God can transform bad news into good news? Who would know – how in the birth of Jesus, God was becoming one of us to save us from our sins?

The Christian Faith is unique in that it does not call for us to leave this life in order to know God. Instead, God comes to us. He comes to us in the person of a baby, His only son, born like we are born – to make Himself known. That's the good news of the Gospel. That He is born for us and still comes to us with blessings on top of blessings. Christmas in July? Because of what God has done – it's Christmas always.

Rev. Charles M. Cary
The Moorings Presbyterian Church
791 Harbour Drive
Naples, Florida 34103

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