

“Homily for Christmas Eve” by Brenda Seat

December 24, 2016

Christmas Eve



As we read these Lessons and sing these Carols every year, I always feel like the story seems a little too neat and tidy. Like the Christmas cards I get with the nativity scenes that always make the holy family look so serene, the words that we hear seem to gloss over all the difficult parts of this story. For example, I always wonder how pregnant Mary must have felt on that swaying donkey, traveling to Bethlehem. I am sure it gave morning sickness a whole new meaning! Or I wonder about the anguish and uncertainty Joseph must have felt when he found out Mary was pregnant. It cannot have been easy for him to accept a child that was not his, and maybe even more so when he found out that it was God’s promised one. How was it that they ended up in a stable? Why wasn’t there room for them in the inn? Bethlehem was where Joseph’s family was from; surely there must have been relatives they could have stayed with. Who helped Mary birth this baby? And what about those shepherds crowding into the stable all noisy and dirty, with sheep baaing and threatening to wake the baby Mary had just fed and put to sleep. No, the story of the nativity was far from neat and tidy. It was chaotic and, if I am honest, it seems

like God could have done a little bit better in the planning department!

Mary and Joseph were simple folk. They were not educated sophisticates or from powerful families. They were simple people, living simple lives who suddenly found that they were playing major roles in the story of how God was going to redeem the world. People had been anticipating and hoping for the coming of a Savior for many years but when Jesus was born God upended all their expectations. Jesus wasn't born into a wealthy branch of the house of David, but rather a poor one where they had to work hard just to sustain themselves. This was no warrior or a rich and powerful king who could fight, buy or negotiate for the people of Israel in order to save them from their misery and oppression. No, Jesus was just a baby, who needed to be fed, burped and his diapers changed. Hardly an auspicious beginning if your mission is to save the world.

What surprises me each time I read this story is how God, the omnipotent, became humble and dependent on ordinary, regular people to fulfill God's plan for the world. Mary had to be willing to bring this baby into the world and care for him, nurture him and sing lullabies as she rocked him to sleep. Joseph, too, had to be willing to claim this child as his own son, and protect him, take him to the synagogue and teach him what it meant to be a man in that time and place. It is a strikingly long-term plan, for this Savior needed to grow and interact with his parents, his siblings, his aunts and uncles and grandparents, and the people in the village in which he lived. For it was not until 30 years later that Jesus began to live into the plan that God had for him and his life. All during his growing years Jesus was surrounded by ordinary people, living a rather hard and obscure life, and yet God chose this way, this path, this woman named Mary and this man named Joseph to be parents to the one we call Emmanuel, God with us.

The Christmas story is a reminder that God's plans often turn what we think upside down, that it is often out of chaos, and with our willing participation that God's grace and redemption for the world unfold and it is not always in ways that seem important or powerful. Sometimes

it is as simple as a song.

Silent Night, which we will sing as our last hymn tonight, is a well loved Christmas carol but it might never have come into being if the organ in St Nicolas Church in Austria had not broken. Some people claim it was mice, some claim it was rust that broke the organ, but in any event the organ did break and the organist found out that it could not be repaired before the Christmas Eve service. When the organist told the pastor that they would be without an organ for the Christmas Eve service, however, the pastor improvised. He remembered a poem he had written several years before and asked the organist if he could compose some music for those words which could be accompanied by a guitar instead of the organ. With very little time the organist composed the music and he and the pastor sang what we now know as Silent Night during the Christmas Eve service in 1818.

Weeks later a well known organ builder came and fixed the organ and, when the organist sat down to test the repaired organ, he began playing the music of Silent Night. The organ builder was moved by the music and lyrics and took a copy of it back to his own village where two quite famous musical families heard it and included it in their repertoire as they traveled and performed around Europe and the United States.

Thus, from mice or rust which broke an organ, a poem written and almost forgotten, and a musician's willingness to write music on a tight deadline, emerged one of the most beloved songs of Christmas which has been translated into more than 300 languages.

But the story doesn't end there. In 1914, during the height of World War I, German and British soldiers were facing each other across a "no man's land" in trenches. The war had been brutal and the rate of casualties and death was devastating. The Pope had called for an armistice for Christmas Day, but this was war and no one knew how to stop it. As Christmas drew closer, soldiers on each side began to decorate their trenches for Christmas and then, early in the morning on Christmas Day, German soldiers began singing Stille Nacht and the sound of their voices carried across no man's land to the British

soldiers who knew the song and responded by singing back Silent Night in English. And for one day there was peace on earth.

God's ways are indeed mysterious, but the Christmas story gives us some strong clues of how God works in the world. God's ways are unexpected and turn our normal way of seeing things upside down.

Chaos and untidiness are signs that God is at work, and God, the Omnipotent, keeps humbly asking each one of us to do our part as we birth and nurture Christmas anew each and every year.

Amen.