

**“I HAD NOT KNOWN  
THAT HE WOULD HAVE TO BEND LIKE THAT”**

Luke 2:1-14

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on Christmas Eve 2008, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

**Focus Text**

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

Early this year, I came across a poem by Sharon Olds entitled “The Space Heater.”<sup>1</sup>

- In the poem, a person who turns to a counselor for help is distracted during the counseling session by the whirring of a space heater in the corner of the room.
- The patient is shy about asking the counselor to turn the space heater off.
- The counselor senses that something is amiss, realizes the space heater is bothering the patient, and with some physical contortion reaches to turn the space heater off.
- The fact that an imposing counselor would go through so much physical contortion to unplug a space heater has a healing impact on the patient.

When I read this poem, I made a mental note to myself that this would be great for Christmas Eve. The fact that it appeared yesterday on the Library of Congress’ Poetry 180 website (long after I had written this sermon) makes me think someone else had this idea as well.<sup>2</sup> I saved the poem to the file on my computer where I keep material for upcoming sermons.

I also said: “I have got to share this poem with Karen Blomberg.” Karen was our long time Associate Pastor at Westminster. She was also a counselor in private practice. I was certain that she had unplugged many space heaters for many clients, bringing healing in the process. So I slid a hard copy of the poem under her office door across from mine.

Little did I know that a few months later, I would read the poem at her memorial service, in this very sanctuary, following her sudden and unexpected death.

I have had reservations about returning to the poem for this service. After all, if we can help it, most of us don’t want to revisit recent grief on Christmas Eve. But since the poem is about healing from grief, about receiving ministrations of one who “bends” to assist us in that healing, I have decided to read it and draw Biblical and theological parallels I believe it contains to the Lord who “bends low” in Jesus Christ.

Hear now “The Space Heater”:

On the then-below-zero day, it was on,  
near the patients' chair, the old heater  
kept by the analyst's couch, at the end,  
like the infant's headstone that was added near the foot  
of my father's grave. And it was hot, with the almost  
laughing satire of a fire's heat,  
the little coils like hairs in Hell.  
And it was making a group of sick noises-  
I wanted the doctor to turn it off

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Yorker* 1/22/01.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/069.html>.

but I couldn't seem to ask, so I just  
stared, but it did not budge. The doctor  
turned his heavy, soft palm  
outward, toward me, inviting me to speak, I  
said, "If you're cold-are you cold? But if it's on  
for me..." He held his palm out toward me,  
I tried to ask, but I only muttered,  
but he said, "Of course," as if I had asked,  
and he stood up and approached the heater, and then  
stood on one foot, and threw himself  
toward the wall with one hand, and with the other hand  
reached down, behind the couch, to pull  
the plug out. I looked away,  
I had not known he would have to bend  
like that. And I was so moved, that he  
would act undignified, to help me,  
that I cried, not trying to stop, but as if  
the moans made sentences which bore  
some human message. If he would cast himself toward the  
outlet for me, as if bending with me in my old  
shame and horror, then I would rest  
on his art – and the heater purred, like a creature  
or the familiar of a creature, or the child of a familiar,  
the father of a child, the spirit of a father,  
the healing of a spirit, the vision of healing,  
the heat of vision, the power of heat,  
the pleasure of power.

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In this poem,

- The patient, whose gender we cannot tell turns to a counselor for consolation, apparently over the death of a child.
- During a counseling session, the patient notices a space heater in the counselor's office and it reminds the patient of "the infant's headstone that was added near the foot//of my father's grave."
  - The space heater has "little coils like hairs in Hell," reminding the reader of little coils of hair on the heads of infants.
  - The space heater makes "a group of sick noises," again like the noises of a child, wrought with fever.

Frozen and immobilized the patient cannot even ask the counselor to turn the heater off. But sensing the patient's discomfort, the counselor springs into action:

...He held his palm out toward me...  
and he stood up and approached the heater, and then  
stood on one foot, and threw himself  
toward the wall with one hand, and with the other hand  
reached down, behind the couch, to pull  
the plug out.

This effort on the part of the counselor surprises and touches the patient:

I had not known he would have to bend  
like that. And I was so moved, that he  
would act undignified, to help me,  
that I cried...

and the patient begins to trust the counselor:

...If he would cast himself toward the  
outlet for me, as if bending with me in my old  
shame and horror, then I would rest  
on his art...

The poem then spins toward an ending filled with images and sounds of healing:

...the heater purred, like a creature  
or the familiar of a creature, or the child of a familiar...

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I hope you see why I choose this poem for Christmas Eve.

- The bending of the counselor to do what he needed to do to alleviate the suffering of the patient, to gain the patient's trust, to lift the patient to healing and life is about as precise a parallel I have seen in literature of the "bending low" on the part of God in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.
- In Jesus Christ, the mighty, distant, powerful, majestic, transcendent, even unknowable God has "bent low," has done what he has to do, to alleviate our suffering, to gain our trust, to lift us to healing and life.

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The Biblical passages we read at Christmas bear witness to this "bending low" on the part of God. The Gospel of John begins with the majesty of God:

In the beginning was the Word,  
And the Word was with God,  
And the Word was God.<sup>3</sup>

It then quickly moves to God's "bending low" in Christ Jesus:

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,  
Full of grace and truth.<sup>4</sup>

God "bent low" in Christ Jesus, even suffering rejection from his own people, that we might "believe" and "receive power to become children of God."<sup>5</sup>

"I had not known that he would have to bend like that."

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In the Gospel of Luke, which we often hear as quaint, almost Victorian, romanticism, the "bending low" of God appears in the desperate conditions in which Christ is born.

- ...a decree...from Emperor Augustus...
- All went to their own towns to be registered.
- Joseph...went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem...with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.
- ...she gave birth to her firstborn son...wrapped him in bands of cloth...laid him in a manger...because there was no place for them in the inn.<sup>6</sup>

Bending low. Bending low. God bending low, that we may be healed, receive life.

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In the least familiar account of Jesus' birth, that of Matthew's, the bending low is even harsher, marked by violence and decree of death.

- From Bethlehem to Egypt

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<sup>3</sup> John 1:1.

<sup>4</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>5</sup> John 1:12.

<sup>6</sup> Luke 2:1-7.

- From Egypt to Judea
- From Judea to Galilee<sup>7</sup>

In the flight of the infant Jesus across miles of territory to flee the rapacious sword of Herod, God is bending low for us.

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“I did not know he would have to bend like that,” the patient says. Then:  
 If he would cast himself toward the  
 outlet for me, as if bending with me in my old  
 shame and horror, then I would rest  
 on his art...

When the patient recognizes that the counselor is willing to “bend low,” the patient is able to trust.

- In the majestic God becoming flesh and dwelling among us
- In the powerful God submitting to birth in a manger
- In the God of all nations fleeing the decree of one nation’s king

God is “bending low” for us in Jesus Christ:

- “casting himself toward//the outlet”
- “bending with [us] in [our] old/shame and horror” – in the world’s shame and horror, new and old.

In describing this “bending low,” Richard Niebuhr wrote:

The Word that became flesh and dwelt among us, the Son who does the work of the Father in the world of creation, has entered into a human culture that has never been without his ordering action.<sup>8</sup>

“I had not known that he would have to bend like that.” But in Christ, God has.

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No matter what we have known or experienced,  
 We can “rest//on [God’s] art.  
 We can listen as,  
 In Christ,  
 The sounds that have produced “dark memory”  
 Can begin  
 To “purr, like a creature...  
 the healing of a spirit,  
 the vision of healing...”

If you consider yourself to be  
 A strong and independent human being,  
 Or if you are a human being  
 Whose strength and independence  
 Have been tested and frayed,  
 I invite you  
 This night  
 To “rest” in the “art” of the Holy God,  
 Who, in Jesus Christ,  
 “Bend[s] like that” –  
 Bends low  
 To heal and save us.

Amen.

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<sup>7</sup> Matthew 2:1-23.

<sup>8</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 193.