

Christmas Eve 2018

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

Luke 1:26-38

Matthew: 1:18-25

Luke 2:1-14

Luke 2:15-20

Matthew 2:1-12

John 1: 1-5, 10-14

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

Something about This Night

Would you pray with me?

O Lord, the gift of new life, new light...it can only truly be a gift if we open ourselves and receive it. So this is our prayer: Be born in us. Be seen in us in words and deeds of love. Help us bear the good news of great joy, the astonishing story of your coming to a world that is crying out for lack of love. We ask this in the child's name. Amen.ⁱ

Can you feel it?
Anticipation in the air
Something just beyond compare
To any other night I swear

I can feel my heart beating much too fast
No more looking to the past
Could this be the one at last?

Oh, all the years we waited
This one night is everything....

Something about this night
We can't ignore
All the sweat and tears and more
Have made this all worth waiting for!

If there's one chance this could be the one
For every generation

Something about this night. ⁱⁱ



Nativity Stained Glass Quilt Pattern – The Virginia Quilter

Silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given.
So God imparts to human hearts
The blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear His coming,
But in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive Him still
The dear Christ enters in.

By Phillips Brooks, 1868

Director Frohman and the cast sing those lines in *Finding Neverland*. They mean the night J.M. Barrie's play, *Peter Pan* opens in London. But I mean this night. This one night, this birth that split time in two.

There is really nothing like this night. Throughout the world more than a billion people have gathered tonight to remember this birth, with candlelight and carols. In thatched roof chapels and gothic cathedrals, in 37 million churches across the globe, military chapels and community halls, people have come to hear again the old, old story: "Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given."

He is the One for every generation.

Someone noted that if you were to remove the Christian story, particularly the Christmas story, from Western civilization, there wouldn't be much left. This night has inspired literature and art...Dickens and O Henry, Caravaggio and Botticelli, and the most exquisite music ever composed...Handel's *Messiah*, Bach's *Christmas Oratorio*, as well as your favorite Christmas songs and carols.

The birth of Jesus also inspired a strange and wondrous tradition known as the Christmas pageant. We had two pageants here this afternoon. So many people come every year we have to do it twice! The sanctuary was stuffed to the rafters with bright angels announcing, "Good news of great joy which will be to all people." That was after four performances of Barbara Robinson's play, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever* earlier this month.

At its core the Christmas pageant is our attempt to get as close as we can to the story of the birth of Jesus by literally putting ourselves in the story. Pageants have been around since the beginning of Christianity. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have popularized the practice back in the 1200s. He staged a reenactment of Jesus' birth using adult actors and live animals.ⁱⁱⁱ

Eventually children took over the pageant. There was a church not far from here that cast 3 seven-year-olds as the Wise Men. Their moms worked for weeks on elaborate costumes including traditional gifts. The first two boys came down the aisle carrying gold and frankincense. But when the third boy appeared, he wasn't carrying the myrrh. Instead he had a huge bag of Pampers he'd apparently swiped from the nursery. He said that he wanted to give the baby something he could really use.

From live nativities to tiny crèches, there's something about this night, this story that calls us to gather around it. Even those who don't usually go to church seem drawn to it.

Just so you know, I'm not one of those preachers who rags on the people who come to church only on Christmas and Easter. I am, we all, are genuinely glad you're here. You are welcome here – know that. You are welcome here today and every day. Maybe you came tonight because somebody dragged you here. Maybe you're here because something in this story resonates with you, this story that causes people to sing, and light candles, and pray for peace. It is a story of hope, the assurance that we are not alone.

There is something mysterious and compelling about this story. At its heart it is about love. The love of a woman and a man for each other; their love for their child—love they didn't know was in them before he came. And it is about the love that child taught when he became a man – costly love, self-giving love, love for the greatest *and* the least, for the rich and poor, righteous and sinners. The story is about his unique love, which expressed itself finally when he gave away his own life.

We tell the kids that this night is about what happened in Bethlehem -- about Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus; but at a deeper level it's about God, and God's love. *This* is how God's love comes to life -- not in judgement or rules, not in some dramatic display of heavenly pyrotechnics, not in high drama with the sky opening and trumpets playing fanfares—but in the quiet whisper of a new mother, a baby's first cry.

Why would God do such a thing?

There's a story.^{iv} I know, there's always a story, but Jesus used stories most of the time to explain hard to understand things about God. So we can too! It's about a time when all the angels were gathered about the heavenly throne for a conference. Things were a disaster down on earth. (What else is new?) The Creator had become concerned about the state of the world – famine and fighting, fires and fighting. homelessness and hopelessness.

"I've tried everything," God complained. "I have spoken to my children in some of the most splendid words they could ever hope to hear. I've given them Psalms, the poetry passages of Isaiah. I sent them the prophets. They love Micah: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly..." They sing about releasing the captives and letting the oppressed go free, but do they follow my word by keeping the Sabbath and letting justice and righteousness roll down like waters? No!"

There was a protracted discussion about what to do regarding the situation on earth.

Finally God said to the heavenly host, "I think one of you needs to go down there. You will go as my representative, a member of the heavenly court, to go to earth. Live with them, not just for a moment, but every day. Get to know them, become one of them, let them get to know you. That is the only way my love will become truly clear to them. Being there – it's the only way they will understand how different my love is, and how I mean for them to live."

After God said that, there was a loooong painful silence. Some of the angels had already been to earth...Gabriel, Michael, and others had gone to earth to deliver messages for God. They'd seen it for themselves – they weren't about to volunteer for long term duty in such a difficult place.

The silence lasted for an eternity. No one volunteered. No one so much as moved, not even the wisp of an angel's wing. Finally, God broke the silence. Quietly, determinedly, but with no hint of resignation, and no bitterness, God said, "Okay then I'll go."

That's why this night is perfect: because God is with us. We are not alone.

This night is about love – a love that will not let us go. God, who loves us too much to let us go on hurting ourselves and each other; a love so deep that it will stop at nothing to save us. It’s why a billion people will worship God tonight -- *singing carols, lighting candles, and pondering the mystery* of God’s presence in the world.

God has a plan to save us, save us from destroying ourselves, a plan to transform you and me — and give you the strength to live into an incredible future, facing whatever is ahead of you with courage and some serenity—by showing you that you are cherished – and that absolutely nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

The best thing that we can do is live the rest of our lives embracing that love --sharing it, spreading it around, reaching out to one another, across all the walls that divide and confine us.

It’s right that we light candles tonight; we are celebrating the Light of the World, the one who brings light and love to our darkness. He is the hope of the world. Tonight Christ, the Savior is born.

ⁱ Based on Frederick Buechner, *Secrets in the Dark*, HarperCollins, 2007, 55

ⁱⁱ Gary Barlow, “Something about this Night” from *Finding Neverland*,

ⁱⁱⁱ PBS, *Religion & Ethics News Weekly*, “Christmas Pageants” December 17, 2010

^{iv} William H. Willimon, “A Christmas Parable” Day1.org, December 27, 2011