

Christmas Eve at Our Church

A Christmas Eve Dialogue Meditation/Luke 2:8-16

First Presbyterian Church, Champaign, IL
December 24th, 2019, 8:00 Candle Lighting/Communion Service
Matt & Rachel Matthews

Rachel: It's a miracle, really.

Matt: God chose to come to us in a manger. Angels appear to lowly shepherds announcing this glorious birth to a lowly girl, in a lowly place, to a lowly, forgotten people. It was precisely there that God chose to make an entrance—not with chariots and armies, but as a child born to Mary.

R: It is a miracle of flesh-and-bone incarnation.

M: Where do we see the inbreaking of God's grace into this tired, fractious world now?

R: As we make room for Jesus to be born into our hearts, we are able to see the inbreaking of God's grace *everywhere* we look.

M: Walk with us. Allow us to introduce you to three people who love their church and who are finding their way this Christmas Eve to the manger.

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R: Walter looks for Christmas miracles every year. He and his wife did it together for almost 70-years. Together, they found Christmas miracles everywhere. Holy light gilded everything. But Miriam isn't here anymore. She's gone. Now, he's looking for Christmas miracles all by himself. Tears still frequently blur and burn his vision.

He's looking everywhere for signs.

Walking to church on Christmas Eve, he recognizes Kenneth bundled in blankets sitting on a bench at the park. He is homeless for now. They have been saying hello to each other by name since Kenneth blew into town from Racine some months ago.

Can Walter find a Christmas sign in this scene? How can poverty, mental illness, addiction, civic disinterest, the shortcomings of our courts, hospitals, and prisons, and the widening gap between the haves and have-nots be a sign? A sign of what? A sign that the world is broken? A sign that we need a savior? A sign that we are called to love our neighbor, including the neighbors who sleep on park benches on Christmas Eve?

Walter feels annoyed by this kind of miracle. He sits down heavily on the bench next to Kenneth.

"Evening, Walter." Kenneth says.

"Evening, Kenneth." Walter says back.

Both men stare into Westside Park.

Walter knows that Kenneth will ask for money. Walter knows that Kenneth will want to talk about his problems for as long as Walter will listen. Walter knows he doesn't have much time if he is going to make Christmas Eve services on time. But he sits down, anyway.

He looks at his watch buried beneath his coat-sleeve, then gets an idea. "Kenneth, do you want to come to church with me? Right now? I'll help you carry your stuff."

"No, man," Kenneth says. "I've got to keep my bench warm."

"The shelter's open tonight," Walter says. "You know you don't need to sleep on this bench."

Kenneth shakes his head.

Walter almost mentions hot coffee and doughnuts as a bribe, but First Presbyterian doesn't serve food on Christmas Eve. The gospel, yes. Hot coffee, no. Not on Christmas Eve. People are too eager to be with their own families. The sudden fact that this is the first Christmas Eve in forever that Walter has been without his Miriam causes Walter physically to wince and catch his breath.

No Miriam. No coffee. No doughnuts.

Kenneth smells like a locker room, like liquor and smoke and the outdoors. Is *this* a sign? Is *this* how the angels found the shepherds, hunkered down, smelly from living on the land? If the angels were to come now, would they seek out the likes of Kenneth?

"Kenneth, last call. I'm going to church and you can come with me if you want. Or you can stay here."

"You go to church," Kenneth says, "and leave your offering here with me."

Walter gives weekly by electronic auto draft from his bank and seldom puts anything into the plate. His broker has been instructed to make an annual gift of stock before the New Year. So, tonight, his wallet, as usual, is empty.

Maybe *this* is a sign. A sign of what?

"Suit yourself, Kenneth," Walter says, struggling to get up off the cold bench. "I'd really like you to be with me."

Walter knew he was not telling the full truth.

"In heaven," Walter muses, "don't you imagine the kingdom of God includes everybody? I think it does. So, it ought to include everybody on earth, too, don't you think? That means me *and* you."

Kenneth doesn't answer, but the bells at the Episcopal Church do, ringing the hour.

"I think," Kenneth says, "you're going to be late if you don't put on the speed."

Walter starts for the church, careful not to slip on the icy sidewalk. He says over his shoulder, "Evening, Kenneth. Merry Christmas."

"Evening," Kenneth says back. "Merry Christmas to you, too."

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M: It's not hard for Kathleen to see the signs. She's just had her first child. The baby isn't sleeping well, yet, so Kathleen isn't, either. The whole family is tired. Kathleen is bone-tired, a little fuzzy-in-the-head tired.

It's impossible for Kathleen not to think of Mary. Mary was sore from birthing a baby, sore from nursing a baby, and, maybe, sore afraid about the future facing her baby son. Headlines constantly spelled trouble. Rome's local governors were corrupt. Kathleen thought of Mary—poor, brave, burdened, tired, brave, resilient, brave, Mary.

In her heated Urbana home, Kathleen thinks of Mary. This is the only, and clearest sign Kathleen sees this year as her husband bangs through the front door back into the house, shaking off the cold.

"The car is running and warm," he says, rubbing his gloveless hands together. "I'll get the baby and you get the diaper bag?"

Loading the car suddenly feels like a marathon. It all does. The feedings, naps, binkies, diaper changes, the future, getting on coats, braving the cold, loading the car. *Give me strength like Mary.*

Kathleen smiles a prayer, hands Noel off to her dad, reaches for the diaper bag, and ponders these things in her heart.

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R: Samuel is here from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. His immigration paperwork is in order, and he's applying for citizenship, but it's not easy, requiring forms, documentation, and expensive fees. The people at the Immigration Project in Champaign have been helpful. So has the Refugee Center. So has his church, to which he's headed as soon as he buys the last groceries for a late Christmas Eve dinner with his family.

For him, the miracle of Christmas is freedom. In Christ we are free, free from governments, free from forms, free from death. Samuel is convinced, like the Apostle Paul, that nothing *will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord* (Romans 8).

A free man, he aims his cart down the cereal aisle at Schnuck's. So many cereals to choose from, and so much of it. This bright grocery store with aisles and aisles of food, and yet people still go hungry. He doesn't understand.

Yes, Christmas is a time of giving. But giving is a year-round obligation. If other people hadn't given year-round, he would never have gotten the support he got. Giving isn't just a Christmas idea. With his pay check each week he's free to send money home, and he's free to be generous right here and now. He's free, and glad to give in the name of the God who gave his own, only-begotten son.

Samuel zooms around the corner, but it's a blind turn as all turns are, and he bumps into a cart filled with frozen dinners belonging to a big man in a big Chicago Bears sweatshirt. "Watch where you're going, mister," the man scowls. His big red knuckles go white as he squeezes the handle of his shopping cart. "This isn't a race track, is it?"

Samuel feels free to say, "Sorry, sir. I'm running late for church. *Would you like to meet me there?* First Presbyterian, downtown?"

"Take a hike, buddy," the man says.

Samuel does not know what 'taking a hike' means, so he smiles and feels free to say, "Have a Merry Christmas, please."

Samuel feels free to make his way more carefully but no less enthusiastically to the rice, to the milk, to the butter, to the eggs.

The Christmas miracle for Samuel is freedom.

Christ sets us free to love everyone. By the power of the Spirit, God is right here. We are free from the fear that holds us back. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me."

We are free to serve, free to worship, free to be. *"But do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence,"* Paul warns the Galatians, a book which Samuel has practically memorized. *"Do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' If, however, you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another: (Galatians 5:13-15).*

Yes, it's a dog-eat-dog world. That is what it is. But that is not what it has to be. Samuel knows he is free to live another way, to follow Jesus' example, to live like Jesus lived. And Samuel knows, *he is **not** a dog.*

The service at First Pres starts in 20-minutes. The groceries will keep cold in the trunk of his old car. He does not want to be late. His family will be waiting for him. His church family will be waiting.

And he is free to join them.

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M: It's a miracle, really.

R: God chose to come to us in a stable. God's light shined brightly in the world's darkness. Alleluia.

M: And God's light shines brightly now.

R: The old sanctuary at First Presbyterian Church exudes warmth. Families and strangers, one by one, two by two, slip into the pews. They squeeze together as more people arrive; people adopt one another as the place fills up. In a world of fractious division, party politics, us-against-them, we sit together, contentedly side by side.

See, God's light shines brightly in darkness and we aren't as lost as we may have once thought.

M A Chrismon tree towers in the front of the sanctuary bedecked with Christian symbols: Jerusalem crosses, scallop shells symbolic of baptism, doves symbolic of the Holy Spirit, butterflies symbolic of resurrection, anchors, crowns, fish, stars, mangers. The tree bears God's light.

R: Late-comers slip in during the solo, peeling off coats; Kathleen holds Noel as her husband follows into an already overcrowded pew. They are received. Welcomed. Strangers make room. It's a miracle of hospitality, small but beautiful.

M *"O holy night the stars are brightly shining/It is the night of our dear Savior's birth."* Walter stands at the back of the sanctuary catching his breath after taking the stairs, all twenty-four of them, one at a time. If Miriam were here, he would have taken the elevator with her. A big man in a Chicago

Bears sweatshirt slips past him to a spot on the back row. Walter walks up to a less crowded pew up front. Presbyterians are needlessly afraid of sitting up front. He sits down, transfixed upon the singer in the choir loft singing so beautifully, like an angel. A hand pats his knee, and Walter turns to see his friend from the men's Bible study sitting with his wife and their grown kids.

Walter and Miriam didn't have children. At this very moment, he thinks he should feel most alone right now. But strangely he doesn't. Is this his Christmas miracle? That he doesn't feel alone because the miracle of God's love melts boundaries of dimension and time, and Miriam is as *here* as she always was.

R: During the offering, Samuel sits with his family. When the usher comes to their row, he puts money into the offering plate. The children are squirming, but this is no problem. They are at the manger now. There is light, welcome, hospitality, belonging, grace, freedom.

M: During the carol, a woman in the congregation sings badly, terribly off key, and she doesn't care. She is making a joyful noise unto the Lord.

R: A man on the ninth row who didn't want to come in the first place dozes during the sermon. God knows he needs the rest.

M: During communion a man smelling of liquor and the outdoors makes his way to the table, takes the bread and dips it into the cup; is he a shepherd or a sheep, no one knows.

R: A man with a brand-new hip walks down the aisle unaided for the first time in a decade.

M: An earnest pastor loses himself in a fervent prayer and his subjects and verbs do not agree.

R: During *Silent Night* people pass the light of Christ to each other, one candle at a time.

M: The sanctuary glows even brighter.

R: And everyone feels something they don't feel very often, a feeling that may be described as "peace."

M: And the gospel is read.

R: The baby is born.

M: The shepherds are visited.

R: The angels sing.

M: And the story is let out into the world, spread by one teller at a time, a light growing in darkness.

R: We are here to see it, and we are sent out to proclaim it.

M: It's a miracle, really.

M/R: Thanks be to God.