

“CHRISTMAS REMEMBERED”

Luke 2:21-38

December 28, 2008

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This Sunday after Christmas, it's always a challenge for preachers. The story of Mary, Joseph, and the baby has already been done, and this year particularly well done by the children and youth of the congregation. Though we are still in the church season of Christmas, most of us now are just cleaning up the left-overs of the season: new gifts sitting around not having found their place yet, piles of used boxes to be put back in storage, half-eaten plates of cookies and fudge on the kitchen counters, and little bits of ribbon and paper to be discovered in the most unusual places. These remnants notwithstanding, Christmas 2008 has, for most of us, passed into memory. There it has joined the storehouse of memories of a lifetime of Christmases for each one of us: the good years, and bad years, and the unusual ones. So as I thought about this morning, I decided I would share with you some Christmas memories. Since I do my most enjoyable work in company, I enlisted some of my fellow staff members to help me out, to share with me, and you, their memories of Christmases Past.

Most of us have some delightful memories of Christmas. My favorite ones from my staff colleagues come from Ann Hawkins, Cindy Quesenberry, and Joan Caldwell. I'll start with Ann, because some of you have known her all her life, and I get to reveal aspects of her that I'll bet you would never have guessed! Ann tells me that as a young child, she had interesting tastes in “food.” For example, she liked the taste of dead matchheads—see, I told you you were going to learn something new—which were in plentiful supply since her father, Dan Poling, still smoked at the time, and she also liked the taste of the tar from the Harding school playground. Fortunately, she had more conventional tastes as well, which included black olives. She remembers that when she was about nine years old, Santa left a can of black olives for her, which she immediately opened, drained off all the liquid, and then planted the olives on all ten of her fingers, and plucked them off and ate them one by one. The perfect gift.

One of Joan Caldwell's Christmas gifts as a child was always the presence of her favorite cousin Carol Hannauer. The two families spent Christmas together at their grandmother's house. Carol and Joan got to stay together in a big double bed in the attic, but much to the adults' chagrin, the children didn't get much sleeping done. Instead, they passed much of the night talking and giggling together. Every year, the grown-ups threatened to keep them apart, for their own good, of course, but what loving parent could resist two little girls, their faces earnestly upturned, promising, “We're big girls now. We'll be good and go to sleep,” and so yet another Christmas passed talking and laughing together all alone in their comfortable nest at the top of the house.

Cindy Quesenberry shared that her family all loves the mountains and being in the snow, and so, for them, an annual Christmas ritual is to go as a family to Fall River, play in the snow, and just enjoy being together in a winter white landscape.

I know my earliest Christmas memory is of impatience. My sisters and I used to wake up Christmas Day while it was still dark. My mom and dad would send us back to bed until 7:00 a.m. It was brutal. And then we were allowed out of our rooms all the way to the top of the stairs, where we could just barely

crane our necks to see into the living room where the presents waited. Once we were freed from our bedroom prisons, then we still had to wait while first my parents went downstairs and then my grandmother. Now Tutu, my grandmother, was a very large woman, and quite lame. She moved very slowly in the best of circumstances, but on the stairs, her progress was excruciatingly slow. So there we would sit, three little girls, huddled together, quivering with excitement on the landing as she made her stately way from one step to the next, sighing heavily all the time. Finally, she made it all the way down, and across the endless expanse of the front hall, into the living room and to her special chair, and only then did the signal come, and my sisters and I would tear down the stairs, and my father would play Christmas carols on the hi-fi, and Christmas morning would begin!

Not all memories of Christmas are so happy. More than one staff member shared with me difficult years: years when a family was in crisis, years when someone had died and the emptiness of one place at the Christmas table overshadowed all else, or years when for no particular reason, Christmas just never really seemed, well, joyful. It was just going through the motions. I remember one year when I was in college, and my boyfriend of the moment kept saying he was coming out to visit me, but he didn't come, and I was so wrapped up in the misery of that that I missed all of the good stuff going on around me—friends and family and laughter. I wanted the one thing I couldn't have, and that wanting blinded me to all else. It's hard when for reasons internal or external, Christmas doesn't bring the warmth and joy it promises, and yet those down Christmases happen to us all; they are part of the fabric of Christmas remembered.

And then there are the unusual Christmases, those that don't turn out quite as imagined, but they make good stories afterwards. Susan Wickes recalls: "Growing up in southern California, I'd always yearned for a "white Christmas"-- like in the song. Ten years on the east coast had produced many snow storms but never on Christmas. One year in the '80s, we had our extended family set to gather for Christmas dinner at our house. My mother and father-in-law were coming from southern Oregon, and my brother's family from the north side of town. Everyone was bringing a part of the meal. Christmas morning dawned -- and the snow began to fall. The southern Oregon contingent called early in the day: we can't get through the mountains in this weather. We -- and the dessert -- won't make it. Then my brother called. We're stuck on Vineyard Mountain -- with the vegetable dish." So Susan and Bill cooked the food they had, set the table and periodically joined the neighbors outdoors, including the ones who couldn't get to the airport for their flight, to push the occasional car stuck on the way up the hill.

"Finally," Susan writes, "we sat down for our partial meal." My daughter Lara announced that she didn't feel well, could she go watch TV. She could. Her brother Ken then wanted to know if he could take his plate downstairs too, to watch while he ate. Hard to say no. So Bill and I ate turkey and potatoes and gravy by ourselves.

The song hadn't mentioned that if you had "white" you might get a lot less "Christmas." I haven't wished for a white Christmas since." So a caution to you all; be careful what you wish for!

So there we have it: the good and the bad and the unexpected. And all of it is our experience of Christmas. Every year we hear the old story and sing the carols. Every year we trim the tree and make our plans and hold in our heart both those near and far. But when the day comes, it will be what it will be. Christmas is the day we celebrate the human meeting the divine. And in our store of Christmas memories,

we know those times when God with us is as intimate and joyful as the giggled whispers of two children at the top of the house. Equally, our experience of God can be searching without finding. We often don't know why that is, but even those who practice the presence of God in a fashion both disciplined and robust, even they know times when God seems far away, idea more than presence. So we pack it away and hope for better in years to come.

I used to think that every Christmas should be happy, that if we were truly faithful, then we would see the Christ light no matter what else was happening, or not happening in our lives. But Christmas is as much about the fullness of our humanity as it is about the fullness of God. We are beings whose lives go up and down, take strange turnings, and don't always present as ordered. That is how God made us. It's what we celebrate, as much as anything else, when we see the baby in the manger. God has entered into human life, real human life. And so our memories of Christmas Day or any day will always bear the mixedness of our nature. And when I think about it, really think about it, I wouldn't have it any other way. Thanks be to God. Amen.