

St John United Church of Christ
Rev. Barbara Lohrbach
December 17, 2006

Luke 1:26-38

Surely it is God!

It's one week before Christmas—and that is the focus now in the “retail rush” to Christmas...one week to spend all the money you can to celebrate the Christmas holiday. It's also the 3rd Sunday of Advent—a season of the church year that very few notice anymore.

Now I'm not going to berate you or me today for taking part in the Christmas madness. My hope is that we do our best not to be consumed by the madness and lose the meaning in the midst of the chaos. We who live in the 21st century inherited traditions that have become part of celebrating holidays as well as the commercialism that permeates the season. We do have the ability to choose what we will do. May we choose well.

Last week as I sat in a dark theater watching the movie “The Nativity,” smelling the popcorn and sitting among the red Santa hats that always appear this time of year, I was poignantly aware of the vast difference between the first Christmas and Christmas as we know it. The movie tells the story as we know it combining the details of the four Gospels. Here's a refresher on what the Gospels say about the birth of Jesus. By the way, it wasn't known as Christmas until much later.

The Gospel according to Matthew begins with a long genealogy to legitimate Jesus' ancestry. The writer then tells of Jesus' birth from the dream of Joseph (1:18-25). In 2:1-12—tells of the visit of wise men. When you read this note that it doesn't say how many and note they come to a house which indicates that Jesus was older, probably in his terrible two's. The church celebrates the wise men in the season of Epiphany 12 days after Christmas

The Gospel according to Mark says nothing of the birth or childhood of Jesus. The writer begins the story with an adult Jesus entering his earthly ministry.

The Gospel according to Luke begins with prediction of John the Baptist's birth (1:5-25), and then the prediction of Jesus' birth (1:26-38). Both Elizabeth and Mary receive the news of their pregnancies from the angel Gabriel. Luke tells of Mary's visit to Elizabeth (1:39-56) and her response to being chosen by God. He covers all this in the first chapter. Luke's narrative of the birth of Jesus (2:1-20) is the longest, although he leaves out the wise men and the trip to Egypt and includes the 8-day old infant Jesus being presented at the temple in Jerusalem for circumcision (2:21-40).

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The Gospel according to John says nothing of angels and stables and wise men, not even a baby named Jesus. He writes of the Word and that the Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Our Christmas story is a combination of all those details. The movie “The Nativity” follows that tradition and adds the imaginative details that we would expect, including the crossing of a river on the way to Bethlehem and a snake that frightens the donkey on which Mary sits. The movie depicts the reality of the experience of Mary and Joseph and their families; poor people who lived day to day, hoping to eek out enough to sustain their family and to keep the Roman tax collectors at bay. The movie also brings home the reality of the experience of a young girl, betrothed, that means promised to an older man, finding herself pregnant...a situation that allowed a man to have the girl stoned to death. She was property and it was expected that she be pure. It is the story of a man who knows what he is allowed to do, but even before the angel visits him, decides to show mercy and let her live.

It is a story we know so well. It is also a story that has been so homogenized and glamorized that we forget the reality of its hardship and pain. We forget that being pregnant and unwed was a disgrace even to death. We forget that Jesus was poor. We forget that the first visitors to the cave where the animals were kept were the shepherds who were at the bottom of society’s ladder in Jesus’ day. They were the untouchables, the outcasts. We forget that the gifts the Magi brought were symbols not only of Jesus’ importance, but of Jesus’ future sacrifice—gold, myrrh and frankincense.

We also forget that Jesus was a Jew. His family knew the Torah and kept the commandments. And while it would not have been unusual in that culture for someone to be visited by an angel, there would always be the suspicion of Mary’s story. Mary—we Protestants seem reluctant to acknowledge Mary’s place in this story. Mary, whom Luke goes into to detail about, is central to the story of Christmas. As I watched “The Nativity” I was reminded of the great faith Mary had in God, the God she had known since birth...the God who is described in the lesson from Isaiah—“Surely God is my salvation. I will trust, and will not be afraid.” Mary knew these words that were a part of her faith. And yet we know that Mary must have been so afraid. Being afraid is not something we have to deny...it is an emotion, a feeling, a reality. Being consumed by our fear is what causes fear to win.

Mary and Joseph live the reality of being human. While we would rather not think about the reality of the Christmas story, it is there, just as the honest truth is that

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nearly everyone goes through some kind of really hard time. A life without real pain and real tears is not a normal life. We all know something about that.

How do we find faith in the midst of real life with all its experiences? When we are being “eaten up” by the world, how do we trust God or ourselves or anybody?

Set in Australia's Great Barrier Reef, Finding Nemo is the tale of a clownfish named Marlin, and his heroic search for his son Nemo. Marlin's past is filled with calamity—including the tragic loss of Nemo's mom and siblings in a ferocious barracuda attack. Ever since, Marlin lives timidly, fearing another dreadful thing would happen. He plays it safe, never trusting, never risking.

His apprehension makes him overprotective toward Nemo, hovering over him incessantly. His worst fear is realized when Nemo is trapped by a deep-sea diver and taken to Sydney. The anxiety-ridden dad sets out on an epic journey to rescue his son.

In his travels Marlin meets a lonely fish named Dory, and his fears isolate him from her. He is so afraid of making a bad choice he dismisses her advice, and second-guesses her opinions. Dory is more trusting and willing to try, even at the risk of failing. She has faith. Marlin has none.

In this clip, Marlin and Dory are trapped in the belly of a great whale. Marlin, in frustrated fury, pounds against the slimy walls until he falls limp, worn and dejected.

Show clip. (Text of clip follows)

Dory cooed with motherly tenderness, "Are you okay? There, there, it's all right; it'll be okay."

"No, no, it won't," was Marlin's reply. "I promised Nemo I'd never let anything happen to him." If he could only have been more vigilant, more cautious, and somehow taken even fewer risks. If only..." Dory responded, "Huh, that's a funny thing to promise."

Suddenly a rumbling sound startled them. The whale began to tilt back, and the water began to recede. They hung on as Marlin cried out, "He's eating us!"

But Dory didn't think so. Convinced she could communicate with the whale, she thought he should be trusted. As she loosened her grip, she compelled Marlin to do the same. "He [the whale] says it's time to let go. Everything is gonna be all right."

"How do you know? How do you know something bad isn't gonna happen?" Marlin asked.

"I don't" was her reply.

And after a moment's hesitation, they both surrendered their grasp.

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Marlin stepped into dangerous uncertainty and embraced the hazards of faith. It was a wise choice. The whale sprayed them out in Sydney Harbor where they were soon joyfully reunited with Nemo.

End clip.

“How do you know something bad isn’t going to happen? I don’t.” That’s the reality of living. That’s the reality of being human. That’s the story of Christmas as well.

Mary brings us real life when she is told by the angel that she will bear a child...real life, real pain, real fear. Mary brings us good news in the story of Christmas. Even though there is real pain and real fear in life, there is also real hope and real faith. The good news is that just like Mary and Joseph, we hold on and we trust in the God we know. “Surely it is God who saves me.” Keep walking through the darkness; don't let the darkness win. Surely it is God. Surely it is God. Yes, my friends, it is God. How do you know something bad won’t happen? I don’t. But I do know that God goes with me and sends others who will go with me too.