

“Does anyone know what Christmas is all about?”

Christmas Eve, Year A.

The Rev. Barbara Ballenger

Dec. 24, 2022

I’m sure if you look closely at the floor tonight, you’ll find some tinsel, a little glitter perhaps, a feather or two. It’s evidence – angels have been this way; shepherds and their sheep were here keeping watch. You might even find an errant pair of tinted spectacles-- “angel glasses” that make the invisible visible and cut the glare”, I’ve heard tell.

All evidence that there was a Christmas pageant in this place a few hours ago, and that our parish children and youth were riffing creatively on the story of the Birth of Jesus that we heard tonight from the Gospel of Luke. The kids did a fantastic job. You can catch it on the recording of the live stream on our Facebook page if you’d like to give it look later.

The author of Luke imagines a very involved birth story of forced censuses, and crowded inns, and visitations by angels and shepherds. And where Luke is short on detail we have long filled in the blanks in works of art, and Christmas carols, folktales, and Christmas Pageants. In all of these things it’s tempting to pull out just the sweet parts, to crank up the angel song, and the friendly beasts and the magi gifts and to downplay what it would feel like to travel 70 miles on foot when 9 months pregnant, how cold it might get in a stable at midnight in ancient Palestine.

If you read between the lines, you’ll see that the story of the birth of the Son of God is also filled with disappointment and pain and fear in less-than-ideal conditions. So this time of year, I like a holiday story with a little shadow in it, one that understands that life can be a struggle.. That’s why I like to make sure that in the days leading up to our celebration of the birth of Jesus, I watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas.”

This animated special about Charlie Brown’s frustrations directing a Christmas Pageant premiered in 1965, the year before I was born. So I grew up watching the annual televised Christmas special. When I was little, I didn’t really understand what a tough time Charlie Brown was having. I think I began to see him more clearly by 7th grade – and knew full well what it felt like to get bullied, and taunted, and to have earnest beliefs laughed at by the kids in the neighborhood.

I didn’t realize until just recently how vulnerable that little Christmas special was, how it nearly didn’t get released at all.¹ It was the first time Charles Schulz’s *Peanuts* Comic Strip had been turned into an animated special. One week before it was due to air, the creators and producers were sure it would be a disaster. Vince Guaraldi’s jazz score was highly unorthodox for a kids’ program for the time, the pacing was slow, and it quoted Scripture. Charles Schultz, its creator, wanted to be able to include the “real story of Christmas.” He wanted actual child actors who could voice pretty sophisticated lines. They had less than a year to put it all together. The whole thing, I read recently, was a bit of nightmare. It was finished so close to its air time that it couldn’t be canceled, so it ran anyway.

And people loved it – the music, the voices, the story.

¹ <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/charlie-brown-christmas-special-history-television-classic-cbs-180957490/>

More than 50 years after its release I think that *A Charlie Brown Christmas* is still cherished because it is honest about what being human really feels like. "I know nobody likes me," Charlie Brown says in the face of a mailbox devoid of Christmas cards. "Why do we have to have a holiday season to emphasize it?"

Oh ouch. But It's this human condition, with its depressions, its rejections, its cruelties and its crazy hopes, that Jesus entered and lived fully from cradle to cross to empty cave – accompanying us, taking us with him.

"Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Charlie Brown cries, after his purchase of a little, live Christmas tree instead of a big commercial aluminum one subjects him to humiliating laughter from the *Peanuts* gang.

It remains the most important question of this season. And Linus, blanket in hand, answers him with the King James Version of the passage from Luke that we heard tonight. Watch closely and you'll see that right at the part where the angel says "Fear Not, for behold I bring you glad tidings of great joy," Linus drops his security blanket.

Charlie Brown takes his little tree home to decorate with the words of Linus and Luke ringing in his ears. There's a bit more to the story, which you can watch on YouTube. Every year I see something new in it.

The story of the perilous making of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* reminds me of the original Christmas story itself – which was also ill conceived, untimely, filled with inexperienced actors and vulnerable to the threat of cancelation. The Scriptural images and cadences have since become so familiar that they bounce right off the ears. But read between the lines, put yourself in the story, and it will walk home with you.

Does anyone know what Christmas is all about this year? we should ask with Charlie Brown. Well in this place, it's about one thing and one thing only: that God is with us. When we are depressed or disillusioned, God is with us. When we suffer from pantophobia – the fear of everything, God is with us. When we are lonely and rejected, God is with us. When we are wrapped in tidings of comfort and joy, and for a few minutes can drop our security blankets, God is with us.

And the love of a God who is always with us, changes us, if we let it. It makes us capable of bringing that love to others, who need it as much as we do. It invites us to be beloved community, gathering regularly in the name of that love, in order to magnify it in such a way that it is easier for people to find when they come looking for what Christmas is all about.

Everywhere we go after tonight, we should leave a little evidence that we have helped proclaim the story - a bit of tinsel, a feather or two, a ring hope that lingers in people's ears.

In the name of that hope, and in the name of the St. Peter's community, I wish you a Merry Christmas.

