

“Listen to Your Life”

Luke 2:1-20; John 1:14

Christmas Eve

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When I was a child growing up in the Midwest I always looked forward to snowstorms. When a large snow was coming, like most kids, I looked forward to the possibility that school would be closed. We’d have a “snow day”—maybe two or three of them, if we were lucky. When it was snowing at night, I remember lying in bed praying that the next morning we would awaken to the news, “No school today.” In the middle of the night when I heard the snowplow on the street, I’d look out my bedroom window wondering if the snow was going to be deep enough. I dreamed of a whole day to play outdoors, sled on the hill in the park, build snowmen, make snow angels, and have snowball fights. We’d come indoors only to get warm and have cookies and hot chocolate. Would this snowstorm change an ordinary day into a special day? In the morning, when the good news came, “no school,” it was magic.

Snow is like that, isn’t it? There’s something magical about it. It changes the world around you. It transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. It brings a beauty and a silence like nothing else can do.

In the winter of 1947 a great snow fell on New York City. To this day it is known as “the Great Blizzard of 1947”—the biggest snowstorm in New York City history. The writer Frederick Buechner was a boy living in Manhattan that year. He remembers it well:

“It began slowly, undramatically, like any other snow. The flakes were fine and steady and fell straight, with no wind. Little by little the sidewalks started to whiten. Shopkeepers and doormen were out with their shovels clearing paths to the street. After a while the streets began to fill and the roofs of parked cars were covered. You could no longer tell where the curb was, and even the hydrants disappeared.... The plows could not keep up with it, and traffic moved more and more slowly as the drifts piled up. Businesses closed early, and people walked home from work. All evening it continued falling and much of the night. There were skiers on Park Avenue, children up way past their bedtime. By the next morning it was a different city. More striking than anything else about it was the silence. All traffic had stopped.... Nothing on wheels moved. The only sounds to be heard were church bells and voices. You listened because you could not help yourself.”¹

Snow is like that, isn’t it? It’s magic. It changes the world. It transforms the ordinary into the extraordinary. When you walk outdoors after a new snowfall, you notice the silence, don’t you? The world stops. There is nothing but silence. You listen to it because you can’t help yourself.

It's Christmas Eve and here we are together. Christmas Eve is like a great snowfall. It brings a silence like nothing else. The world stops. Christmas Eve stills the noise of our world, at least for a moment. And it can quiet the noise in our hearts too.

Tonight the Christmas trees light up the night. The wreaths and poinsettias bring festive color. The candles give light and warmth to winter's darkness. We look into the faces of friends and family we love. Music fills the air—"Silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright..." We hear the Christmas story again—a simple story with a beauty beyond telling. It's the story of a child born by lamplight in the late night silence. A story that speaks a mystery larger than us, larger than our world.

Can you hear it, the Christmas word that speaks in the silence of Christmas Eve? Tonight, of all nights, we listen. We listen because we can't help ourselves.

"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." An ordinary baby born to an ordinary mother. A baby lying in a manger—a feeding trough for animals—in an ordinary stable where smelly animals were kept, fed, ate, and slept. And yet, the story proclaims that in all this ordinariness, the extraordinary happened. *"The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth"* (John 1:14).

The miracle of Christmas is that in Jesus, God comes to us. Entering into our world, Jesus reveals to us who God is, and who God will be. He is Emmanuel—"God with us." God who came in Jesus. God who continues to come among us. God who comes into our ordinary lives.

Can you hear it here in the candlelight, in the mystery of this moment? We've been busy with so many things. Our lives are so noisy, cluttered by other things. But now the blizzard is over. The wind and snow have stopped. The world is silent. Christmas Eve is like a great snowfall. It brings a silence you cannot help but hear.

One week ago tonight my wife Debra and I were at our older daughter's wedding in Houston. The weeks and months of preparation and hard work leading up to the wedding were over. The night itself went, oh so quickly. Every moment of the wedding and the reception were a joy and a delight. But now, in some ways, it's all a blur. A blizzard that went so fast. Now in the silence there's time to reflect on where we are in our lives. Our daughter is married and has a home of her own. It won't be the same anymore. There's a sadness in that, even as we have great joy for the newlyweds. In these very days we need the presence of God. We need to know God's presence in our sadness and our joy.

What's been happening in your life? What blizzards have been swirling around you, what storms have you been living through? Can you hear it, the Christmas word that speaks in the Christmas Eve silence? It is the word, "God comes! God is here!"

"Out in the fields there were shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night." To ordinary shepherds, on an ordinary night, doing their ordinary work, taking care of their flock, an extraordinary word came. God came to them. Shepherds were not highly regarded people. They lived a hard life out in the field, far removed from the comforts

and leisure of town. They were poor and lived outside the boundaries of polite society. And yet, the story says, it was to these ordinary ones that the extraordinary happened.

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for I bring you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah—Christ the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’”

“And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, good will to all.’”

You know the story. The angels went away from them into heaven. There was nothing but silence. The shepherds went with haste. They found Mary, Joseph, and the child. The shepherds’ lives were changed. They told others, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

Ordinary shepherds were the first to hear, the first to see, the first to tell of Jesus’ birth. God comes in unexpected places. God comes to unlikely people. And God comes in unexpected moments in our lives. God comes to us in our fears and longings, our loneliness and broken places, our struggles within and in the darkness of the world around us.

Some of us are celebrating Christmas this year without a husband or wife, mother or dad, we’ve known and loved for many years. Some of our families are living with the pain of divorce, strained, or broken relationships. Some of us are living with financial concerns or struggles, or with chronic pain, cancer, or other illnesses. Whatever is happening in your life right now, whatever you bring to this moment, the promise is that God comes to you. Wherever you are on the journey of faith, the living God loves you and wants to be part of your life.

The good news of Christmas is that if we’re paying attention, we too can experience God in the ordinary moments of our lives—when we’re fixing dinner, folding laundry, working at the office, or putting a child to bed. The extraordinary can happen anywhere, anytime, in the ordinary routines of life. Frederick Buechner says it this way:

“Taking your children to school and kissing your wife good-bye. Eating lunch with a friend. Trying to do a decent day’s work. Hearing the rain patter against the window. There is no event so commonplace but that God is present within it, always hiddenly, always leaving you room to recognize him or not to recognize him, but all the more fascinatingly because of that, all the more compellingly and hauntingly.”²

In some moment of beauty or pain; in something someone says to us; in a book we read; or in music we hear....suddenly God is present. Life is transformed.

The power of Christmas Eve is the astonishing good news that God is a personal God who loves us and comes to us with grace—special, undeserved favor and goodness. God accepts us in our humanness and offers us the joy of growing in his grace and goodness. In coming to us, God brings us the hope and peace for which we long in our lives.

Tonight, Christmas Eve, is like a great snowfall that changes the ordinary into the extraordinary. It brings a silence that can quiet the noise of our world and the noise of our hearts.

The good news is that God doesn't speak only on this night. God speaks all the time, in unexpected places, at unexpected moments, if we're listening and paying attention.

So listen to your life. Whatever's happening in your life right now, God comes. God always comes. He is Emmanuel—God with us. That is the good news of Christmas!

Notes

¹Frederick Buechner, *A Room Called Remember: Uncollected Pieces* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1984), pp. 61-62.

²Frederick Buechner, *Now and Then* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1983), p. 87.