

Gospel Matthew 3:1-11 and Isaiah 11:1-10

Let us Pray:

Much of the world is thinking it's just 20 days of shopping till Christmas. But we know we are in the second week of Advent. We are also waiting for something. But we are working from a different calendar – a liturgical calendar and that calendar tells a different story than the “Night before Christmas”. A story that was predicted. As in Isaiah: *a shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*

The people were waiting. They didn't yet know the story. But we do.

It's a remarkable story – this Advent Story, this Christmastide story. It's a story of a birth and one short life. But at this point I fear, we have heard the story so many times, that it is just . . . a story.

But imagine yourself an alien, or a very young child – or someone raised in a completely different tradition. In other words someone hearing this story – the original Christmas story - for the very first time.

It's the story of a young couple, unmarried, she very pregnant – from the country - and they have to travel to the city to pay their taxes. Seeking a place to stay - but there are no rooms available anywhere in the city. there are no hospitals, (at least for our poor couple) only a stable, no crib even, only hay. no doctors, only a few animals and later some shepherds and a few wise mystics from the east.

Put yourself in the place of one hearing this for the first time:
This is a story of angels and dreams, of evil kings and large bright UFOs and then more dreams and a flight for their lives, it's exciting and dramatic. It is like a fairy tale, the best of fairy tales – good guys and bad buys – violence and love and a baby.

And then the story kind of disappears; the child that was born that particular night, only re-enters our story as an adult. As we read in Matthew - a reading that always happens in Advent - the story of cousin John the Baptist who reintroduces us to this now grown “baby”. John, who is of distinguished ancestry, his family tree goes all the way back to King David. But he is a wild man. He's crazy. A man who must have antagonized the authorities so much that he was run out of town and had to preach in the wilderness, where he ate a diet of locusts and wild honey. He was no doubt dirty and disheveled. He wore clothes made out of camel's hair – like an old Middle Eastern hippy.

In the meantime, remember the people were still waiting . . . waiting for a Messiah - the shepherds were waiting, the Sadducees and the Pharisees and the scribes were waiting – all the people were waiting for a messiah. waiting for a leader that would vanquish the enemy - a leader with military and political power, who would rescue them and bring them out from under oppression and occupation.

And who did they get? what did we get? a baby! a Jewish baby born of poor Jewish parents, born in a barn - who lived his earliest years in exile afraid to return to his own country - a boy who lived a simple rural life for 30 years in the hilltowns. And then we have his right hand man – his harbinger – his scout who was sent on ahead to prepare the way. He's the opposite of what we'd want in a PR guy. He's announcing the messiah?? He's more like a homeless bum, living out in the woods, Threatening the people, Threatening the religious authorities "You brood of vipers." who warned you to flee from the wrath to come. You think your ancestry will protect you? You hypocrites!

But despite his appearance and his message, despite his fervor and his threats, the people of Jerusalem and all Judea flocked out to see him. They left their comfortable homes and sanctuaries to hear what this wild man had to say.

And despite the kind of fairy tale birth story, people still go to church and read the Bible and visit the Holy lands to hear this story over and over again.

There are 2 Billion Christians in the world - almost 1/3 of the over 7 B world pop. So this preposterous fairy tale of a story stuck.

But what happened to this radical preposterous story? It's been hijacked by may, many people over the centuries for individual gain. And more recently, it became commercialized. This story has been hijacked by the corporate, advertising world, who use it for their own financial gain. And it's been a successful campaign. For this is what Christmas has become for many, many people. I just heard of a mother telling the story to a child who after listening said yes, but Santa is really the important one in the story, isn't he? These stories have gotten all mixed up. Sometimes I think they won – they got the story. They took it and they are making it theirs. They are the ones who get to tell it.

But I'm not willing to give it up . I like our story. It isn't a hallmark story. I want to re-claim this story. I want to take it back from the world of corporations, and shopping malls. And even more so I want to take it back from the romantics who

have domesticated it and made it all so pretty. It's not pretty. It wasn't pretty. It was difficult, and challenging and violent and oppressive. And still I like this story.

I'm glad (glad isn't quite the word, but I'm going to use it.) the messiah, the savior, came as a baby

I'm glad his mother was poor and unwed, and understood discrimination.

I'm glad there was no room in the Inn so they knew the experience of homelessness

I'm glad that the whole scene was blessed only by a few farm animals

I'm glad that Joseph listened not to the purity codes but listened to Mary and didn't desert her

I'm glad that they weren't proud but humbly raised their child in the country.

I'm especially glad about the wild man John who knew how to live in the wilderness, who didn't care about looks, or reputation; who didn't judge people by their ancestry but what was in their hearts; who wasn't afraid to speak the truth despite that fact that it was certain to offend and did. It cost him his life.

I'm glad that Jesus was Jewish and was raised with the strong laws and commandments of the Hebrew Scriptures.

I'm glad that the wise men disobeyed the orders of the empire and went home a different way.

I'm glad that it was workers out in the fields, not the rich and the powerful – to whom the birth was announced

I'm glad the family was able to flee Judea for a time and learn what it meant to live in political exile as refugees

I'm horrified that a jealous king slaughtered hundreds of young boys to get rid of this "newborn" King. It's frightening in a way we understand today.

No, my friends, this is not a hallmark story.

it's real,

it deals with poverty, and power and prophecy and pregnancy and privilege.

It deals with deception and disobedience and dreams and despair

it deals with revenge and refugees and reverence

This is the Advent Story – a good one, one that can be read over and over again and still continue to nurture and challenge us.

There is a Santa Claus story and it's pretty good too. In fact, it's great. Let's give that to Hallmark and the corporate advertising world.

But I won't give away OUR story – THIS story. It's one of the many reasons I like being affiliated with a church. Here, away from the stores, and malls and advertising, we can keep this radical, funny, dramatic, painful, political and preposterous story alive.

And we keep it alive not by just reading it over one time a year at the Christmas Eve service but by figuring out what it tells us about how to live our lives. It tells us a lot about the world we live in and about our lives today – about poverty, about refugees, about walls and discrimination and intolerance, even about mass murder. About resistance, about trust and faith in God. About patience. About looking for love and truth in unlikely places. If we can hold on to this story and keep it in our hearts, especially in December, then, as our Call to worship said:

*.... all the jarring, jangling
Jostling, frenzy-crying
Of a crazy World
Hungry for love
And lonely for peace
Cannot noise away,
Cannot haste away,
Cannot ache away
The holy*

This is our holy story. May we hear it again this season as if for the first time.
Amen

Call to Worship Maren Tirabassi

Like the echo of prophet's warning
Like the hint of angel song.
Like the breath of candle flame.
Advent comes.

Like a frost etching
In a snow-silver cave
Of waiting silence
Like the dark of the moon
Deeper than night sky.
Like the ballet of firelight
Dancing shadows on the hearth,
Advent comes.

And all the jarring, jangling
Jostling, frenzy-crying
Of a crazy World
Hungry for love
And lonely for peace
Cannot noise away,
Cannot haste away,
Cannot ache away
The holy