

Christmas Eve 11 pm
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 24, 2019

In the back of this sanctuary, about three years ago, a young woman who was home from college to see her parents thanked me for the beautiful Christmas Eve service and then said, "it's all just a story, right?" It's a great question. But I don't actually think she meant to ask whether it was a story. I think she meant to ask, is this fiction? Her facial expression told me that she was skeptical of this whole Christian enterprise, with its Virgin births, miracles, and saviors who rise from the dead. I understand her reservations, and I answered her this way: Is it a story? Yes. Is it a fiction? No.

Stories, more than atoms, more than DNA, are the building blocks of our existence. Everyone sitting next to you in the pew is a magnificent creature made up of stories. Every Sunday, at the altar, the priest tells the story of Jesus sitting with his disciples and breaking bread and sharing wine with them. Whenever we baptize a baby, we tell the story of God's breath moving over the waters of creation and the story of Moses escaping Pharaoh through the parting of the Red sea. Storytelling is one of the most powerful things we do together as Christians. So, when my young friend wondered whether the Christmas Gospel should be dismissed because she thought it was JUST a story, I think she didn't have an expansive sense of what a story actually is. One of my favorite authors, Terry Pratchett, puts it this way: "It's all stories, really. The sun coming up every day is a story. Everything's got a story in it. Change the story, change the world."

At Christmas, we tell a special story — or we watch it performed by little lambs and angels and shepherds like we did tonight at 4 pm — that forms a part of who we are as Christians. We say that the mightiest king in the world comes to us as a baby. We say that God arrives, not on clouds with fire and lightning in His hands, but in a stable, with the poor, to refugee parents fleeing persecution. We say that this Child is at the same time human as God. "Veiled in flesh the Godhead see, hail the Incarnate Deity, Pleased in flesh with us to dwell, Jesus our Immanuel," in the words of the hymn.

Those are radical claims. Or, you might say it's a story whose ending surprised everyone. We've heard it so many times, it's easy to forget that it has its wondrous and bizarre elements. Tonight, take a moment to encounter this story with a fresh perspective, with the wonder of someone hearing it for the first time. Smell the straw, hear the baby cry, attend to the shepherds in the fields afraid because they know that something has happened that changes the entire world. Listen to the voice of the angels announcing that grace, love, and peace have entered the world in a special way.

Imagine Mary and Joseph telling Jesus the stories of his ancestors. They would tell him about the seven great days of creation and the making of the sun and the moon and the stars. They would tell him about Moses and the burning bush — about the wandering in the desert until the people find the promised land flowing with milk and honey. They would tell him about Ruth and Esther and Judith. And they would tell him the stories of the prophets — men with blazing eyes coming

into Jerusalem to call people back to the covenant with God and to the care of the orphan and of the widow. These stories go into the ears of this little baby and begin to knit themselves into his bones, making him who he is — Jesus our Christ. It is the stories, not dogma, that are the bedrock of our faith.

And then you were a babe in arms, not so long ago, as the stories of the faith were handed down to you — of the Sermon on the Mount, and the feeding of the 5,000, and cross of calvary. These stories began to knit themselves into YOUR bones and made you who you are — followers of the Christ, the little baby who we celebrate tonight. These stories are our joy and they are our power. Our stories are the connective tissue between us and all Christians throughout the eras, who came together on Christmas Eve to worship the Christchild as we do tonight.

So yes, my friends, the Christmas Gospel is a story. And, at the same time, there is nothing truer. The world is changed because of this little baby, who will go on to say things so miraculous that we still share them with one another. “Blessed are the poor for they will inherit the kingdom are God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will inherit the earth.” And “In my father’s house there are many rooms.” And “I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in my love.” The words of Jesus continue to ring in our ears generation by generation. And more importantly, this little baby who we worship tonight is our God, who loved us so much to live here as one of us — to share our hopes, fears, burdens, and loves. This God, who understands us so intimately and still wants to be here with us tonight. This story is God’s gift to the world. Amen.