

Christmas Eve - December 24, 2011
The National Presbyterian Church

Here Comes the Truth

John 1:1-5, 9-14; John 14:5-6; John 28:37-38

Dr. David Renwick

This evening, I want to begin by sharing with you a story, a rather lengthy story, but a true story told in the December 1992 edition of the *Presbyterian Survey* (pp. 10-12), by Beatrice Stevenson* about an unforgettable Christmas Eve in India. She writes (I have abbreviated the story slightly) . . .

I was far from home and children that year. My husband was a visiting surgeon at Miraj Medical Center in West India, and I found it difficult to feel any joy or meaning of the Christmas season, until I witnessed a most unusual Christmas pageant. This was my first taste of India, and I'd found it all quite fascinating - the temple festivals, women in their colorful saris, narrow village streets, chaotically crowded with logjams of people, boats, bullock carts, bikes, and honking busses. And suddenly, my world was changed. I became a patient in the hospital where my husband was working. And in my pain and weakness, all the glamour went out of my visit. How, I thought miserably, can I ever celebrate Christmas in this alien place?

As the sun went down Christmas Eve, carpenters and electricians were still putting final touches on a large outdoor stage. But already the courtyard was packed with curious townsfolk, sitting cross-legged on the ground, their buzz of talk rising in an increasing crescendo like a hive of swarming bees. In the foreground squatted hundreds of noisy, restless kids.

Then suddenly, the miracle began. As the stage lights flashed on, an expectant hush fell on the waiting crowd. From the street came the clatter of hooves and a shaggy donkey appeared out of the night, a drooping Mary on its back; those that followed thwacking away busily on the donkey's rump and uttering salty admonitions to keep the pair moving. On the stage, a frantic inn keeper drove them away

from his inn. Nearby, some ragged goat herds warmed their hands at a small fire while real goats and kids milled, bleating among them.

Suddenly there was a burst of music from many angels, singing Christmas carols from raised platforms above the stage, and from the second floor balcony surrounding it. Spotlights picked out a rustic grotto where a real baby, borrowed from the obstetrics ward, lay in a straw filled trough. The Magi entered, resplendent in satin robes of crimson, gold, and royal purple. Surrounded by goat herds, they knelt to offer their precious gifts to the baby, while Mary, her blue sari framing her sweet young face, bent over the baby in wondering devotion. Mary's husband stood close by, caring and protective.

It was a lovely tableau, and I was strangely moved by it. What had happened before my eyes was so real that it almost seemed that the little Lord Jesus had been born anew. I'd never felt this way about other Christmas pageants.

But there was more to come. We were suddenly electrified by the anguished cries of the angels, as the enormous shadow of a cross was thrown on a wall above the manger scene. "What is this?" an angel cried in horror "Is this to be the fate of this innocent baby?" "Who would do this dreadful thing to the little Lord of Heaven," another angel wailed, ringing her hands. And a chorus of angels cried out, "Who will help him?"

- I watched in suspense as a band of soldiers with guns and truncheons marched across the stage. Their leader, pausing at the manger, said contemptuously, "What can a helpless babe do? The only power in this world comes from the mouth of a gun."
- Next, a ragged beggar hobbled up, leaning on a crutch, his feet bandaged, and a begging bowl in his hand. "Little One," he said to the baby, "What good am I to you? I'm only a beggar, and I'm faint with hunger and wretched with pain. I cannot help you and neither can you help me, for this sad life is my fate, my karma."
- Then across the stage came a gaunt young mother with a baby on her hip and two small children clinging to her sari. "I'm so harassed by these children that I can't think of anything else," she explained to Mary. "Maybe later, when they're older, I can come back."
- A bearded guru came by next, a pile of sacred books under his arms. "I worship many gods," he said haughtily to the baby. "If you want to be one of them, you may; I don't mind. I'm very

broad minded. But to follow you only? How ridiculous. I need a god for every occasion. One simply will not do."

At this point, the angels who had covered their eyes with shame at the sacrilege, cried out to the audience, "Is there no one here who will give allegiance to the King of Heaven? God's very Son has come to help us. Does this mean nothing to you?" The audience stirred uneasily, troubled by this appeal.

- Suddenly, there was a fresh craning of necks as a smiling young woman in white sari and nurse's cap mounted the stage and knelt before the manger. "Gladly will I serve you, oh Lord my King!" she exclaimed. Then turning to the startled crowd she said, "I come from the southernmost state of Kerala. And there we have followed the Christ for almost 2,000 years, ever since his disciple, Saint Thomas, came to India to tell us the good news that we can become sons and daughters of Almighty God. For me, as a girl, this has meant growing up in a loving Christian family, where I was just as important as my brothers; where I, too, had schooling and where instead of being married off, I was allowed to choose my own career and my own husband."
- Next, a working man with a garden hoe in hand came forward. Also kneeling by the manger, he cried out, "Oh, Lord, my Savior. I owe you everything - my life, my health, my new standing in this Christian community. Gladly will I serve you all the days of my life." Then turning to the audience, he explained, "I once had leprosy. I was an outcast, doomed to a life of begging until I heard about this Christian hospital. Here, doctors cured my leprosy and operated on my useless, claw-like hands - look," he held his hoe aloft, "now my fingers can bend and hold things again. At last I'm useful. I have worth."
- Finally, a dignified older man in a surgeon's cap and gown approached the manger, prostrated himself before its baby, then turned to the audience to say, "You know me well, my friends. I am Dr. Chopade, a surgeon here at Miraj Medical Center, and I've cared for many of you over the past 20 years.

But what you may not know is that I was an Untouchable." A startled murmur swept through the crowd, but his kind voice continued, "Yes, according to your law, I was unholy - a non-person, not created by the gods as you are. As a boy, I lived in a segregated part of our village. My widowed mother cleaned latrines for a living, and I rummaged through the village

garbage, competing with dogs for something to satisfy our hunger.

But I wanted to be someone. Especially, I wanted to be a doctor like the ones I'd seen from the Mission Hospital, who tended the sick in our village. So I would sit as close to the school as I dared and listen to the teacher's lessons. He often cursed me, and the children would chase me away with stones." Approving catcalls came from the audience. "But each day, I'd be back. Then I learned something wonderful. There were missionaries from across the sea who actually wanted to help Untouchables. And with their help, I graduated from college and medical school. And here I am."

For a long moment he gazed out over the crowd, his dark eyes tender and pleading. Then turning back to the manger, he pressed his palms together in the classic Indian greeting and murmured, "Thank you. Thank you, Lord Jesus."

From the angels above the stage and the surrounding balconies floated a final song, 'Silent Night, Holy Night, Christ the Savior is Born'. For a moment, the audience sat transfixed. Then in complete silence, arose and moved away to their dark streets and homes . . .

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. . . wondering if the story they heard and the changes it had made in the lives of those who had spoken could really be true - true in general, and true for them, in particular.

When St John, in our second reading, begins the story of Jesus at the beginning of his Gospel account of the story of Jesus, *it's the question of the truth and the impact of that story that concerns him most.*

Unlike Luke and Matthew, he is not concerned with the details of the story of Jesus' birth with Mary and with Joseph and the Wise Men, and with the shepherds and the star and with the baby in the manger (in fact, John doesn't tell this part of the story at all!). That is, he is not concerned with the first half of that wonderful pageant that Beatrice Stevenson witnessed. But he's desperately concerned with the second half, with the impact of that story on human lives; desperately concerned on the impact of that story on the lives of people in generations to come - all around the whole wide world - wondering and hoping that their lives would be changed by the story, just as his life had been; for he had seen Jesus, not as a baby but as an adult in flesh and blood, with his own eyes, he says, he had seen him; and touched

him, knew him as his friend, and was still able to say that here in our presence, born as one of us, in human flesh, was God - becoming weak and helpless, risking everything, to come to Earth to help us; to help us.

Some of us need help like Dr. Choparde in the story, because we feel the pain of exclusion.

We know what it's like to be on the outside, to have no one to speak to us; to be in a crowd and everybody passes us by as if we were a non-person, invisible.

-- *But here, says John, here comes Jesus*, noticing everybody; speaking to anybody and everybody - to all those whom others pass by, bringing those on the outside into the inside with God. John calls Jesus the Word of God: God's presence on Earth, born on Earth, *to speak to us as if we were the only person in the room*; to speak a word from God to you and me; from God, who knows us better than we know ourselves. To notice us, to address us, to single us out and say, "You're the one I want to speak to, and for whom I came that first Christmas." If only we would listen; he has a word for us, to bring the life of God into our lives.

Some of us need help because we feel left out, as if no one has a word for us.

Some of us need help because we're afraid that life is going too quickly; it's going to run out on us, and it's not going to add up to anything before - before we face death and life is over, like the gardener in the story, with leprosy, or the beggar on the streets.

Maybe something has happened to us, or is happening to us right now, that seems to rob us of life. Perhaps we feel we've been dealt a bad hand in life; bad karma as the story would put it! Maybe it's through an accident; maybe it's through illness; maybe it's through a disability; maybe it's because of our background. Or maybe we've just made some bad choices and we're reaping the consequences of them, and we don't seem to be able to get out of that spiral - we're caught in it. And yes, we are, day after day, paying the price. And then what? Then it's over? and it's gone? Final whistle? And it hasn't added up to anything at all.

-- *But here comes Jesus, says St. John*, here comes Jesus, restoring life, reviving life, renewing life, claiming that he is the resurrection and the life. And even at the end of his life when he faces death, coming back to life after his death. So John calls Jesus, in the opening verses of our Scripture reading, he calls him the "Life of God," born into the world, born into this world, entering *our* world, a world in which death seems

to win the day, and where people settle for mere living, getting by, instead of life in all its fullness. And in coming to this world he says to us that if we would only put our faith in him, if we would only give to him our allegiance, he would give to us life that is 'life-indeed,' eternal life, abundant life - life with God, that will never end, and that is worth continuing forever. It's his to give, this one who enters the world that first Christmas. It's his to give and it's there for the asking - out of sheer grace.

Some of us need help because we really don't know what life is about. And we're afraid it might pass us by.

Some of us need help because, like the mother in the story with the children, we feel as if we're trapped; we're in a box. We may actually have everything that we want - maybe she did: three kids, husband who loved her, who knows what she had -- but even then, sometimes when we get what we want, we still can feel trapped. Reached the top? Where else is there to go? Powerless to get out, with no light at the end of the tunnel and a long, long way before us - not sure that we can keep on going.

-- *But here comes Jesus, says John:* Jesus the True Light - not just the Word, and not just the Life, but the True Light that brightens everyone; the light that overcomes the darkness - not by force of arms like those soldiers who come across the scene, but by the force and the power of love. Whatever darkness or evil or power we face or that we find ourselves in, this Jesus who came to us this first Christmas is not above it. He descends into it to be with us in whatever box we are in, incarnate in flesh and blood to live his life with us and in us and around us; to fight our battles for us; to hold our hand, and to hold his light high (like a Roman battalion standard), even when the darkness seems to prevail. And he says to us, "Keep following me, and we will make our way through to the end - to the time when your powerlessness and your weakness is all gone - I'll see you through to the end."

Some of us need help because we feel stuck, caught in a box, powerless in a world in which everybody else seems to have the power.

Some of us need help because we have no clue what to believe anymore. We live in a world where we're not sure if anything - if anything is true anymore. Rather like the guru in the story, no one has any objection if we believe that Jesus is, well, just one truth

amongst many. Well, that, my friends, is not the Jesus, born in flesh and blood that John was proclaiming to the world. -- *Here comes Jesus, says John, and . . .*

- His Jesus was the Word who was with God in the beginning before all of creation, entering this world as a baby.
- His Jesus was the true light that enlightens everyone, full of grace and truth.
- His Jesus was the way, the truth, and the life.

There is no doubt that much has happened to shake up our world and its perception of truth in the past one or two hundred years or so, from Darwin to Einstein to Heisenberg; from the Holocaust, to Vietnam, to corporate corruption; from digitization to Photo Shop to our Global Village. The truth seems harder to find, and to grasp and to understand, than it used to be. Our world is not what it was.

But even knowing that, don't be deceived – not everything has changed! The human condition has not changed as the years have gone by. And cynicism about the truth is nothing new. It was just as strong in Jesus' day as it is today.

Remember from our Scripture reading (18:38)? How Jesus at the end of his life, stood before his judge, the Roman governor, Pontius Pilate, and declares that he has come into the world, he was born that first Christmas, to testify to the truth. And what does educated, sophisticated Pontius Pilate say in response? Something, I supposed, that we've all said at some time or another. "What is truth?"

Well, even in the light of the known skepticism of his day, St John still affirms confidently that Jesus is 'the truth'. Not a statement, not a set of laws, not a philosophy, not even a theology. But a person! This person who is embodiment of the love of God; this one whose very life makes visible the god of the universe; this one who would be willing to humble himself to enter our world in flesh and blood, and then to suffer for you and for me, to help us where we cannot help ourselves -- this is the one whose life in all its significance is the truth, the core, the center, the anchor onto which we can hold when all else shifts around us.

It's a great story, a great drama or pageant: God entering the world in flesh and blood; Mary and Joseph and the Wise Men and the shepherds and the star - all of it - it's wonderful. And those who saw the story portrayed in Miraj, many for the first time, and some like Beatrice

Stevenson, perhaps for the hundredth time - those who heard it were transfixed by it, as we still are to this very day.

But if it's only a story, if it's only an annual sentimental trip into the world of fairy tales, then we've missed it. We've heard it, and we've missed it, because something miraculous happened that night, truly miraculous. Something unique happened that night, for us, for the world, for your life, for mine.

- The truth is that the eternal word of God,
- the truth is, the life that gives life to the world
- the truth is that the light that lightens every darkness
- the truth is that the truth that sets us free and gives to us a center and anchor for life that nothing and no one can take away

. . . became one of us, that we might know God, now and forever, and receive his help where we are, so that God could lead us on from here to where God wants us to be.

Remember the cry of the angels in the face of all the darkness, as those different folks moved onto the stage? "Is there no one here who will give allegiance to the King of Heaven? God's very Son has come to help us. Does that mean nothing to you?" Or everything. There is nothing in between.

Let us bow before God, in prayer. Holy God, help us, like children, to be filled with awe and wonder at what you have done and will do for us. Stir our hearts. But help us, too, like adults, to act on what we hear in such a way that we embrace you not only now in this holy moment, but in the days to come - in ways that, like those who came on that stage in Miraj, in ways that change our life. We thank you for meeting us where we are, and for longing to lead us on to where you want us to be. So bless us to this end, this night and always. Amen.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, NW Washington, DC 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800