

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2021

OLD SOUTH CHURCH IN BOSTON

**A Christmas Word** by Nancy S. Taylor, senior minister

The Christmas story is rife with plot twists and evil despots. There is fearfulness among the innocent and anxiety about personal security. A small family huddle against a cold and indifferent world, holding each other tight.

One of the reasons the Christmas story is so meaningful is how realistic it is. This is no fairy tale. It mirrors our lives: the plot twists, the presence of menacing evil, our own fearfulness and anxieties; the intimate, inescapable relationship between life and death, living and dying. We know such things. In our bones. In our aching hearts. These are real.

Our mortal fears are not glossed over by the story, but rather affirmed and recognized. The precariousness of human life, and its preciousness, are held in tension. There are hard decisions to be made, with not enough hard data to inform the decision making. The Christmas story proclaims that it is precisely to such a world that God came and comes.

Thus, for all the evils and all the ills, the Christmas story affirms the presence of a benevolent God, the shining ideal of good, the promise of hope with each new birth, the power of love, and, not least, divine tenderness toward the disinherited.

On Christmas Eve we retell and rehearse this ancient, yet ever new story. We tell it and sing it and proclaim and preach it against the background of an insinuating pandemic, contemporary despots, profound fears and upending anxieties.

The Christmas story affirms that while evil is present, real and powerful, so, too is good. While the world is a place of violence and brutality, the yearning for peace is ancient and strong. It is because of this, that we refuse to abandon the hope of justice.

The Christian story is not a once and done, happily-ever-after story. It is an unfolding story, an ongoing drama that matters, deeply matters. It is a real life drama in which the forces of good and evil are joined. It is a story in which we are asked to play our part, you and I.

We are not expected to win the war; but we are expected to participate in the skirmishes, the battles ... taking the side of the good, the side of God: the side of peace in a violent world; the side of mercy in a vengeful world; the side of warmth in a sneering world; the side of the poor in a world that prizes wealth; the side of the downtrodden in a world vicious with power.

And you do. You do take sides. I know you, many of you, well enough to know that you do take part in the skirmishes, you do take sides, and you put yourselves on the line.

I see you, our doctors and nurses, plying your trades: employing science and reason to ease suffering, to heal bodies, to save lives.

I see you, our educators, our teachers and professors giving young minds the tools to learn and analyze, to deduce and to problem-solve, that they might change the world, or their corner of it, for the better.

I see you, a congregation of caregivers who, far from the limelight, commit countless acts of kindness, companionship, neighborliness; consequential acts ... acts that matter.

I see your bravery in the ways you parent your beautiful children in a world of dangers and woe; I see it in your life stories and in the battles you wage.

I see Old South taking God's side in supporting the resettlement of two Afghani families -- a family of five and family of eight.... Recent refugees since the Taliban seized Kabul. These two families -- these thirteen lives -- are sheltered, fed, and supported as Boston churches, Old South among them, stepped up.

Last Saturday I observed some fifteen of our families with young children taking God's side, by exercising tenderness toward the disinherited. They prepared Christmas presents for unhoused neighbors: gifts of warm socks, hand warmers, Chap Stick, gloves, hats, scarves, Duncan Donut gift cards, and more. Carefully, the children filled each box with gifts, wrapped each box, decorated cards and then bundled up to go out onto Boylston Street to deliver them, one by one, person by person, to unhoused neighbors.

Even now, this night, by worshipping in this way, we are taking God's side to protect one another, to keep each other safe.

In undertaking these small, quiet, unsung acts, day in and day out, away from the limelight, you/we enter the fray, engage the contest, take sides. As was true 2000 thousand years ago in Palestine, the insatiable Herod's get all the news and all the attention. Yet, all the while, among and through you, God is quietly and persistently at work. Ours is an underground movement, but no less powerful, meaningful or impactful. Never forget that.

The power of the Christmas story is the very truth of it ... a truth we know in our own bones and lives, in our own aching hearts. This is no fairy tale. It is a consequential contest with good and evil, life and death in the balance.

The next carol imagines the angels' heralding the new born king, and the peace and mercy of his reign. The angels herald the child with song. And song, well, song is among the ways we, too, herald the child.

But there are other ways, other heraldings ... the heraldings you do, all of you, so quietly, so earnestly and bravely, far from the limelight in every instance in which you take a stand, side with God, and enter the fray.

Bless you for that. Bless you for siding with God and taking your place in the story of this holy night.

MERRY CHRISTMAS.