

“The Nuisance of Christmas”
A Christmas Eve Sermon
December 24, 2007
by Dr. Frank Trotter

In 1946 George Bernard Shaw, the famous British playwright wrote, “Christmas is for me simply a nuisance. Fifty years ago I invented a society for the abolition of Christmas. So far I am the only member.”¹ With some wit and self-deprecation, Shaw was noting that the observance of the birth of Christ was bothersome and unnecessary for an unbeliever, for an atheist or agnostic. In short, it was a nuisance.

I would like to suggest to you tonight, in brief, that Christmas is no less a nuisance to believers here and anywhere who gather to sing carols and hear the ancient tale of how the Lord God chose to become a vulnerable, humble child.

Theologian William Loader notes that when Caesar Augustus ordered the famous census cited in Luke’s gospel that brings Mary and Joseph back to Bethlehem, that same Caesar Augustus was “was hailed as son of God, as bringer of peace, as saviour, as a good news person. Rome made much of these claims to legitimate its regime of suppression and exploitation, law and order, throughout the empire.”²

And as if to undermine all that Caesar Augustus and Rome were trying to do, along comes the subversive story of another Son of God, another savior, another bringer of peace – but with a startling difference. For the story of the birth of the Son of God that began circulating out of Judea was about a “baby whose family can’t find accommodation; the good news of peace comes to ordinary shepherd folks of the hills; the peace is about real peace, real inclusiveness. It is people’s peace, people’s power, people’s salvation and liberation. The parody at birth reflects the parody at death, where we see the king crowned with thorns upon the throne of a cross.”

¹ George Bernard Shaw, quoted at “The Writer’s Almanac with Garrison Keillor,” Monday, 22 December, 1997, <http://writersalmanac.publicradio.org/programs/1997/12/22/>.

² William Loader, “First Thoughts on Year A Gospel Passages from the Lectionary: Christmas Day,” <http://wwwstaff.murdoch.edu.au/~loader/MtChristmas.htm>. Professor Loader is a member of the faculty at Murdoch University, Uniting Church in Australia, in Perth.

Thomas Merton, the great twentieth century mystic, makes the same point with different words: “Into this world..., in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it – because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it – his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.”³

And there lies the rub for us, the terrible nuisance of Christmas. For it suggests that this child who is born this night will inevitably challenge us to reexamine all of our allegiances and values; that we, who are supremely comfortable, will be invited – if we would believe in him, truly – to become advocates for those in this life who have no advocates, to become voices for those who are voiceless, to becoming agents for peace in the midst of a world that knows little about how to make peace or hold onto it.

As I wrestled with this nuisance of a sermon, I found myself turning to poetry which is often a source of inspiration and comfort – a few lines of which I would share with you tonight.

Norwegian poet Rolf Jacobsen, in his poem, “When They Sleep”⁴, writes:

All people are children when they sleep.
There’s no war in them then.
They open their hands and breathe
in that quiet rhythm heaven has given them.

They pucker their lips like small children
and open their hands halfway,
soldiers and statesmen, servants and masters.
The stars stand guard
and a haze veils the sky,
a few hours when no one will do any harm.

If only we could speak to one another then
when our hearts are half-open flowers.

³ Fr. M. Louis Merton (Thomas Merton), “The Time of No Room,”
<http://www.lo.redjupiter.com/gems/hartfordstreet/TimeofNoRoom.html>.

⁴ Rolf Jacobsen, “When They Sleep,” included in *Poems to Live By In Troubling Times*, edited by Joan Murray (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 129.

Words like golden bees
would drift in.
–God, teach me the language of sleep.

Jacobson's image for us, in the twenty-fourth and final hour of this Christmas Eve night, is of a subversive sleep, into which we must sink if we would learn the radical language of peace. Perhaps he has something for in the ancient stories we hear again heavenly messages come through dreams and whisperings at night. Joseph's sleep is disturbed by an angel who reminds him of justice and compassion when he almost sets aside the young girl, Mary, who has found her way into a scandalous pregnancy. Shepherds, drowsy and muddle-headed at the edge of sleep, are startled when angels choose them – the lowest of the low – to bear witness to a marvelous birth.

Is it possible on this holy night that a subversive God who comes in such unlikely ways could teach us the language of sleep? Could help us hear the whisperings of heaven that would turn upside down the world?

In the past six months (is it really only six?), I have listened to so many of your dreams for this church here in Pasadena. Connecting them all has been a remarkably similar vision of a church and a people who are here for a vital reason and purpose, of a church that has gained a renewed sense of its mission and purpose. I would suggest to you that the disturbing, radical love of God for the world will have a great deal to do with whether our dreams and visions are grounded in the kingdom of God or whether they are as ephemeral as tree tinsel after tomorrow is past.

Anne Sexton⁵ writes:

As the fireman said:
Don't book a room over the fifth floor
in any hotel in New York.
They have ladders that will reach further
but no one will climb them.
As the New York *Times* said:
The elevator always seeks out
the floor of the fire
and automatically opens

⁵ Ann Sexton, "Riding the Elevator into the Sky," included in *Poems to Live By In Troubling Times*, edited by Joan Murray (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 36.

and won't shut.
These are the warnings
that you must forget
if you're climbing out of yourself.
If you're going to smash into the sky.

Many times I've gone past
the fifth floor,
cranking upward,
but only once
have I gone all the way up.
Sixtieth floor:
small plants and swans bending
into their grave.
Floor two hundred:
mountains with the patience of a cat,
silence wearing its sneakers.
Floor five hundred:
Messages and letters centuries old,
birds to drink,
a kitchen of clouds.
Floor six thousand:
the stars,
skeletons on fire,
their arms singing.
And a key,
a very large key,
that opens something—
some useful door—
somewhere—
up there.

That's what I want for all of us this good Christmas – a key, a very large key
that opens something, some useful door, somewhere up there – and down
here.

Why? If for no other reason than to praise the one who was born this night,
this radical God-made-man who is both nuisance and agitator, provocateur
and Savior. As Paul said:

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
who, though he was in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped or exploited,
but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form,
he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.
Therefore God also highly exalted him
and gave him the name that is above every name,
so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Thanks be to God. Amen.