



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Luke 2:1-20

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Christmas Eve

“Christmas: A Story for Our Age”

For 2000 years Christians have gathered all across the planet to tell the story of Christ’s birth. Somehow, this ritual and this story have managed to survive the modern era of scientific rationalism, and the scrutiny of late postmodernism. Both of these worldviews challenge the traditional Christmas story to its core. Scientists rightly point out that stars don’t stop over Bethlehem stables and that there is no recorded empirical evidence for angels, let alone *heavenly hosts* of angels singing to shepherds. Postmodernist philosophers, for their part, point out that this Christian story is just one among many others. It’s no more valid than any other story that we construct to make meaning of our lives. So true, yet the story survives, and here we are, on Christmas Eve, gathered to hear the tale of the birth of God, in Jesus Christ.

While the challenge of secularists is daunting, the more serious challenge comes from within Christianity itself. Christians, including myself, have long been aware that the writers of the gospel have woven together this beautiful story from fragments of the Jewish Scriptures. A Bethlehem birth? – this is an excerpt from the prophet Micah (Micah 5:2). The Magi? – this detail is taken from the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 60:1-6). The

virgin birth? – a mistranslation of the original Hebrew (Isaiah 7:14). What’s more, you’ll find this legend in many different religions. Even Caesar’s loyal followers made the claim that he was God’s Messiah, born of a virgin. The census? – no recorded historical evidence for it. Herod’s evil plot to kill the baby Jesus? – lifted from Exodus. I could go on. Liberal Christianity has known all of this for almost 150 years. We just haven’t let the public know that we know!

So, what is going on here? The story has survived the demythologizing scrutiny of science, the relativism of postmodernism, and the biblical criticism of liberal Christianity.

Perhaps it’s as simple as loving a good story. We are more than willing to be swept away by one. Think about it. We watch *It’s a Wonderful Life* year after year. The opening scene is seriously cheesy. We hear the prayers of concerned people crying out to God for suffering friends and family. Someone sends up a prayer for George Bailey. This prayer is referred to two angels, disguised as stars. They have a twinkling chat about George. He’s contemplating squandering the greatest gift of all – his own life. The two senior angels call in Clarence, a bumbling junior angel, who has yet to earn his wings, even though he’s been

at it for 200 years. Charlie's mission is to go down to earth and help George to see what life would have been like without him, so that he can realize his own value and worth as a human being. You know the rest. George Bailey discovers that with him out of the picture, the greedy and evil ones thrive, and the poor are left to fend for themselves against the forces of corruption. George gets a second chance, Clarence gets his wings, and we finish the last of our eggnog and head off to bed, reassured that there is a moral order, that our lives are in fact important, and that we are not alone – there is at work in this vast and expanding universe a hidden wholeness, a Mysterious Presence that cares and holds all of us and all of creation in a loving embrace.

It's not just a good story, it's a God story. And our souls are parched for one.

We're happy to hear it over and over again, because, truthfully, we can't hear it enough. We know the story is made up, but some part of us also believes that it's profoundly true. And that pretty much sums up the Christmas story as well.

The gospel writers experienced in Jesus of Nazareth a presence so powerful, so compassionate, and so transparent to God, that two of them, Matthew and Luke, wrote a story about his birth. It's a wonderful story. The people are suffering. They pray to their God. God hears their prayers, and is drawn by love and compassion to enter into the realm of creation.

God, claim these writers, is born in a baby, to Mary and Joseph, simple peasants who represent both the plight and possibility of the human condition. They discover their worth and dignity, and their son grows up to proclaim the worth and dignity of every human being in God's eyes. Those who can only measure their own value by diminishing the worth of other human beings will crucify him. But God would raise him up from the grave, an exclamation mark at the end of the story intended to reassure us that ultimately good triumphs evil, justice will ultimately prevail, and love is our destiny.

Well, it's a story, friends. In this age of postmodernism, we face the burden of having to choose the stories that we're going to live by and stake our lives on. There was a time when our Big Stories were simply fed to us, like mother's milk. We had no choice. But today, it's up to us to choose the stories that will shape our lives.

Scientific materialism, for example, is one option. It's Big Story is that we're not much more than a collection of atoms, a string of DNA that over vast stretches of time have arbitrarily and accidentally figured out how to survive in a universe that is at best indifferent and at worst, intent on our demise. The stars are balls of gas, not sources of wonder. This planet coming to life is a cosmic fluke. The rise of consciousness in human beings is nothing more than the firing of neurons in our grey matter. According to one popular version of the story, we're nothing more than the physical

vessels that our genetic material exploits to replicate itself. Any other story of the universe and of humanity, we are told is magic, pure and simple, and surely we're beyond that.

But there's another way to tell the scientific story without abandoning the sacred mystery of life. And that's what we've been doing at Canadian Memorial for the last few years. It's possible to take that same evolutionary story that science tells and which I champion, but strip the story of its materialistic assumptions. I look at the Big Bang, or the Great Radiance, 13.7 billion years ago, and for me it possesses as much sacred mystery as the Star of Bethlehem in the Christmas story. It stands there at the beginning of time as a radiant beacon drawing our wise men of the 21st century, cosmological Magi, to contemplate its wonder. Out of that original radiance, this Christmas Eve service, the music, the candles, the ears to hear and the eyes to see, and the religious intelligence that wrote the gospel of Luke emerged. It is the first birth of God. The Formless One takes form and enters this evolutionary story of creation. That primal light still hovers over us, pointing to the great mystery of sacred birth – what scientists call “creative emergence”. The story of the birth of Christ is set within a larger sacred story of a birth. The birth of Christ then is a pivotal chapter, a radiant spiritual birthing, in a universe that never stops giving birth. And all of it takes place within this Mystery we call “God”.

The birth of the Christ is told in the Christian tradition as the equivalent of a second Big Bang. In his birth, the story goes, a new creation is ushered in. What emerges from the Great Radiance of Jesus birth, however, is not atoms and dark matter or any physical elements. It's spiritual consciousness, a new mind and a new heart. Through this evolutionary unfolding over billions of year, the universe awakened to its own interior depths, its own spiritual nature, in Jesus of Nazareth. He became for humanity, a second explosion of light, radiating the love of God outward, fashioning new possibilities for humankind. When we sing these carols, and hear the story, and open our hearts to the deep purposes of God, the light of Christ from that explosive birth reaches us. The light of Christ consciousness awakens us, and we understand that a new evolutionary process is underway – through us.

This new spiritual evolution is not happening separate and apart from us, but rather *through* us. Bathed in the radiance that is Christ, we realize that we ourselves are centres of sacred evolutionary emergence. The star is now shining right over top of where we are sitting. *This sanctuary* is the stable where a new world order is coming into being. Angels and shepherds and wise ones bring their gifts and lay them at our feet, knowing that if the future is going to Christ-shaped and filled with justice, peace, and compassion, then it will be so because of we've chosen to believe that Christ lives in us, through us, and as us. And if that scares you, it's

understandable. It's easier to believe that we're only here out of loyalty to a family tradition, or a cultural ritual, I know. But your soul is here because it wants to awaken to its deep purpose.

You see, it's no accident that you are sitting here tonight. We all want a better story to tell ourselves and our children than the one we got in science class. And we're all wanting a better story than the one we got in Sunday school, telling us that this Christmas story had to be taken literally if it was going to be true. We're sitting here tonight because, despite the darkness of the season, we know ourselves to be what light looks like after 14 billion years, and because we want to immerse ourselves in the light of that second Big Bang that was the

birth of Christ. We're here because, like good old George in *It's a Wonderful Life*, we want a second chance at knowing what our own life is worth – that we're needed. Without us, without our willingness to spread this Christmas light, the world will be a darker place. We're here because the same sacred heart that beat within the baby Jesus beats within us – a heart that longs for the evolution of our species, to realize our unity with God, with each other, and with all creation. We're here because the cosmos has aligned itself in preparation for a birth. We come to hear the story of the birth of Jesus, and then discover it's the birth of the Christ within us that we've been waiting for, that the angels are waiting for, that God is waiting for. It truly is a wonder-filled life.