

It's a Really Cool Story
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10:45

One of the shows that I really enjoy on TV these days is *The Middle*—it follows a typical working-class American family—dad, mom, two sons, and a daughter as they go about their somewhat normal lives in Indiana, in "the middle" of the country. The Christmas episode this year had an interesting religious dialogue throughout the show that got me thinking about the Christmas story we all know so well.

The daughter in the family is Christian and quite religious, partly because she seems to have a crush on the youth minister at her church who always shows up randomly to help her with her teenage issues with a guitar and a smile. But in the Christmas episode she discovers that her smart but socially awkward younger brother doesn't seem to believe the same way that she does.

The youngest son is a complete bookworm and he begins reading the Bible and has some doubts about the historical authenticity of these accounts. He says, "I do have a lot of questions though, like Jonah inside the belly of a whale, wouldn't the whale's digestive juices dissolve him? And how could Noah have two of every animal on one boat? Many are mortal enemies. . ." No one in his family answers his questions to his satisfaction and at his sister's urging; he goes to speak with the dreamy youth minister and finds himself even more full of doubt. In exasperation, his older sister tells him, "You have to believe. I'm not sure you get to even celebrate Christmas if you don't believe."

At the end of the episode, brother and sister are looking out the window at the snow gently falling to the earth. The sister comments on how amazing it is that each snowflake is different, that it must take God a lot of time to do that, and it's a miracle! Her brother quietly asks her, "So do you really believe that all that stuff in the Bible is true?" "Oh, absolutely!" she responds. Another moment of silence as they continue observing the snow, and then her younger brother sighs, "I don't know" he says, "But it's a really cool story." [1]

This is often how I think of our Christmas Story—whether it happened exactly like this or not, whether we have made it too perfect or ideal over time, whether we interpret everything exactly as we should—it's just "a really cool story." Think about how well Luke lays out the scene, "There were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night." [2] A peaceful pastoral scene with shepherds on a cold night, with a sky full of stars, and sheep sleeping nearby. These shepherds may have been bored or cold or hungry, but they were out in this field watching over the sheep entrusted to them, passing another night in the county.

And then, "An angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified." [3] All of a sudden, not such a peaceful scene anymore. You have an angel who appears out of nowhere, with the glory of the Lord shining everywhere. Probably a pretty jarring experience considering the peaceful darkness just a moment ago.

With the blinding light comes one angel to be the messenger, "Do not be afraid, for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." [4] A whole host of angels follow, the once peaceful starry night sky erupts with the appearance of this army of angels; praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace among those whom he favors!" [5]

As soon as the angels leave, the shepherds travel "with haste" to find Jesus wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. They tell Mary and Joseph what happened and they return, "Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen." [6] It's easy to see why this story has captured the hearts of so many.

It's also no wonder that in Charles Schultz's *A Charlie Brown Christmas* he chose this passage as the one Linus recites to the children. Linus says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about . . . lights please?" [7] And then Linus walks to the middle of the stage and recites Luke chapter 2 verses 8-14 verbatim.

I think this is also part of the reason people flock to church on Christmas Eve, to see this somewhat familiar, undeniably touching, and mysterious story play out—whether that's in a Christmas pageant or by hearing the lessons or singing Christmas carols or taking communion by candlelight or seeing a dark sanctuary bathed in candlelight as we sing "Silent Night."

Because I knew so early that I wanted to be a minister and I received my call to ministry on a Christmas Eve night in sixth grade, I participated in just about every Christmas Eve service growing up, whether that was acting in the pageant (I was the lead one year as the Grumpy Donkey who complained about all the commotion in the stable since Mary and Joseph were invading my space and cramping my style), or one year I directed the pageant ("The Little Stars of Bethlehem") with my sister when we were in high school, or I would read scripture passages during lessons and carols.

One Christmas, a rather grumpy woman, reminiscent of the grumpy donkey I played that one year, who was also helping with the service, said to me under her breath as she looked around the crowded sanctuary, "I don't know why these people all come to church on Christmas Eve, it's not like we'll ever see them again. Well, that is, not until Easter." I understood her frustration then and I still do now. But I'm also pretty sure that attitude is not a very good one to have on Christmas, the season of giving and good will toward all people, even the ones we only see twice a year—on Christmas and Easter.

So I didn't have an answer then and I'm not sure that I do now. I do find it ironic that on Christmas and Easter most church sanctuaries are packed, and this morning there's the few but faithful who decided to come to church on Christmas morning. If we still believed wholeheartedly that doing good works gets you into heaven, you all would be getting fifty extra bonus points and would be heaven bound based on your church attendance this morning, I'm quite sure.

But I think that maybe, just maybe, this "really cool story"—of shepherds, angels, a baby, and young parents who gave birth to their child in a barn is what gets people into the pews on Christmas Eve (or the chance to see little angels running in the sanctuary and kids on the ground pretending to be sheep, either way.)

This story transcends all our grumblings and complaining and stress and exhaustion and leaves behind a sense of wonder, a sense of mystery, a sense of not understanding exactly how it all works but knowing that it just does. That somehow miraculously God does come to us in the person of Jesus Christ—that God does manifest the very essence of God's nature in this tiny baby born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago—that this means that God deeply understands what it means to be a human being because "In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen savior, God has come to us and shared our common lot." [8]

Can I explain the incarnation—Jesus being both human and divine, God coming to us in the person of Jesus Christ, to you all so well that you will leave here with no doubts or misgivings? No. But does the story of Christmas, the concept behind it, the scenes where the angels

announce the good news and the shepherds run to Bethlehem and find "Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger" somehow allow us to gaze with hope and love in our hearts.[9] Yes. No matter what anyone says or whether we think about Christmas in a sanctuary full of people or with the few but faithful, "it's a really cool story." Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] The Middle, Season 3, Episode 11, "A Christmas Gift"

[2] Luke 2: 8

[3] Luke 2: 9

[4] Luke 2: 10-11

[5] Luke 2:14

[6] Luke 2: 20

[7] Charles Schultz, A Charlie Brown Christmas

[8] UCC Statement of Faith

[9] Luke 2: 16