

“A New Beginning”
Rev. Dr. Bill Ekhardt

As I shared in the greeting this morning, this is the 7th day of Christmas! I am someone who enjoys celebrating the full twelve days of Christmas. I am a pastor's child. My dad is a pastor, so I have the liturgical year baked into my bones. [Laughter.]

In America we have, you know, this pressure to fight the beginning of the holiday season. It seems they start it almost at Halloween - there are Christmas decorations up. I try to keep it to the Advent calendar, so the first Sunday of Advent I want the decorations up in my house, the best that I can, and then once Christmas comes we have 12 full days of celebration. Then the 12th night is the 5th [of January], and the next day is Epiphany - which is the 6th of January. So, around Epiphany I try to get my holiday decorations down. Sometimes, particularly if it is too cold, it might last a few weeks more [laughter], but I try to hit the January 6th mark. And in my household - I don't know what the celebration of Christmas is like for you all - but we are definitely still in the full Christmas festival.

I, as I said, am a pastor's child. So, our tradition has been [that] after Christmas my family comes into town and, since we moved to Des Moines, they have been coming here to Des Moines. My father often comes with my mom - they are rehabilitating right now so they couldn't come this year - but my sister and her kids come, and we have what my children refer to as Christmas time again. There are new presents to open, and shared, and exchanged, and we have feasts pretty much every night.

My brother-in-law is Sicilian, and he has recipes that go back to his grandmother. He learned from his grandmother how to make these recipes and they go back to her childhood, back in Sicily, in this little village. So, we have Brugeluni one night. He makes this bread with baked-in sausage and onions. Today, on New Year's Eve, we have the tradition that *my* mom started, when she taught our kids to make noodles for chicken noodle soup. So, they are going to be cutting noodles for chicken noodle soup tonight.

We have tradition, we have family, we have games, we have fun. All of these are our way of manifesting the joy of this Christmas festival. And that joy is bursting out the seams of this story today.

We are seeking to live out what was happening here. It is fascinating to see this story of the ordinary, as Scott mentioned last week, and the weeks prior, that Mary - in particular - was this very ordinary person who was chosen and dropped into this cosmic story. We see this duality in her life - and it plays out again, in this story.

Last week, the children in our 5 o'clock service acted out the Christmas story of Mary and Joseph coming to Bethlehem, and then the angels coming to the shepherds, and the shepherds coming to Jerusalem to share this fantastic news. We heard from the innkeeper the marvel at what God was doing in this little room under the roof - not a stable apart from the building.

Here we have again this ordinary happening. Mary and Joseph are doing what everyone in their family had ever done. This child had to wait 40 days for Mary and the child to go through this period of purification - this time of uncleanness - and then they come to the Temple to have a sin offering to cleanse them, and an offering of dedication because Jesus was their first-born son, and the first born were dedicated at the Temple. There was this brief little mention in the passage we see in Luke today of Jesus being dedicated, as every first-born child was understood to be the property of God.

So, they are coming the same way she [Mary] was brought to the Temple as a child, and as everyone in her family and everyone that she knew. They were just doing the normal thing, carrying on [when] they had this amazing birth night experience with angels breaking in. And, before that, she was a virgin with child, and before that the Angel Gabriel spoke to her. In between these amazing marvelous cosmic moments, she is just living the normal life that humans live.

I imagine.

Now I was a stay at home dad with four children, so I changed a few diapers. In fact there was a *long* time when we had three children in diapers. So, there was this huge time that we had three children in diapers. We tried to keep it down to just two sizes of diapers. But, I'm just imagining these 40 days were just a normal everyday life of raising an infant, and then going to the Temple, and suddenly the cosmic story breaks in again, and reminds them that they are living this dual existence.

They come to the Temple and Simeon comes – this man who has been spiritually led. He has been told by the Spirit, who seems to be describing a prophet-like experience: He has been given the promise that he would not die until he saw the Messiah of Israel.

When they [Mary & Joseph] walk in with Jesus, he took the child from them. I don't know how common this was, I know it's common for people to love a baby, but Simeon came, and they gave him the child and he began to prophesy over this child in front of them: *My eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord. You can allow me to die in peace now, God, because you have let me see the anointed one of Israel.*

Then he went on to describe [that] this child is going to be [the] revelation to the nations - the Goyim, the other people beyond the Hebrew people - and he is going to be for the glory of Israel. Then he [Simeon] blessed them and shares these hard words with Mary: *that he [Jesus] is going to be a symbol who is opposed, and there will be a sword that will pierce your soul.*

I don't know how much Simeon saw, but somehow Simeon had been given eyes to get a glimpse of who this child was. As Paxton was singing earlier today the beautiful words that "we didn't know who you were," - and, in some way, they had been given glimpses of something that was happening in their midst. They could not possibly have known all of what it meant - none of even Jesus' closest Disciples seemed to understand it until after his death - but somehow, they were getting glimpses of about what was to take place that Simeon was sharing with her. The prophetic words that in my reading of Scripture seem to be talking about that moment, when Mary would be standing at the foot of the cross watching her son lay down his life voluntarily for the salvation of our Lord.

After Simeon blesses the child and shares this hard news, then Anna, another prophetess, this 84-year-old woman - who had been coming and essentially just living at the Temple - had been fasting and praying every day - began going to all the people who were in the midst of the Temple - all the folks who celebrated and spent time there who were looking for the salvation of Israel - and telling them all about this child. It is an epic story. It is a story of normal people caught up in the midst of something far larger than themselves.

I love epic stories; I genuinely enjoy stories of great meaning and conflict. My two oldest boys and I were at the IMAX theater the night that Star Wars opened [laughter] this winter. I think it started at about 10:30 at night, and was a 2 ½ hour show, so it was like 1:00 AM and we were reveling in this. I loved that epic conflict. And these are stories that know how to describe this. There are two levels going on all of the time. There are the kind of ordinary, good people, who are fighting alongside an epic hero, and, in the Star Wars character, the genuine epic battle is between Luke and the Emperor, or another Jedi and the Sith Lord. They are the ones who are fighting. But in the midst of this battle that we know is the crux of everything there are all of these other folks. All of the followers are engaged in faithfully seeking to live out this fight and the struggle. But, in the midst of all of that, what really turns the story is the encounter in the Throne Room between that Jedi and the Sith Lord.

In other epic stories. (I enjoyed the Harry Potter series. May some of you have enjoyed that series as well. Traci and I read that. In fact, one of the books - I don't remember which one it was, maybe the 5th or 6th book - one of our wedding party stayed in line the night before our wedding, to get the book as it came out that morning, and gave it to us as a wedding present that day. So, we began reading that book to each other on our honeymoon.)

Again, it's a story of an epic battle where there are all of these friends who are fighting, or these followers of the light and the dark are engaged in this conflict, but we all know that the real battle is finally going to be coming between Voldemort and Harry. These two, once they face one another, this is where [the] entire arc of the world will turn dark or light.

I'm a fan of "Fellowship of the Ring, Lord of the Rings." Maybe you have followed that as well. It is the same story. This epic story of all of these friends fighting for good against evil. [In] The "Fellowship of the Ring," even this small fellowship is broken off, so that only Frodo, the ring bearer, is going to try and destroy the ring, because if Sauron discovers the ring and grabs it, suddenly the whole world will be turned [evil]. So, there are forks and battles, and fights, but where it really turns [is] when either the ring is destroyed or taken out.

Similarly, with the "The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe" - perhaps one of my earliest and favorite epic stories - we have these four children of Eve, as C. S. Lewis describes them, in the land of Narnia, who are leading or trying to understand how to be these people in Narnia fighting for good; and the evil ice queen has turned all of these speaking animals and other creatures dark, And, there is this battle - this great epic battle - but finally you know the real story will turn, when Aslan and the Queen face [each other].

That is the joy bursting underneath this story today. Mary and Joseph are bringing this infant child to the Temple, and as it was at his conception, as it was on his day of birth, here

again, the cosmic story comes in and shakes their reality. The Prophet comes and tells them this is the one; this kid that you are raising, the one you are going to have to teach how to eat, you are going to have to potty-train; this kid is something so much bigger, so much more profound. What this child is going to do is going to change all of Israel. What we now understand, coming from our part of the story, is that this child changed all of time.

We have the benefit of this marking today of the New Year. It is New Year's Eve, and we will be celebrating tonight the turning of our calendar. We have the benefit of many earlier generations who decided to create a calendar based on the life of Christ.

But, it is extremely fitting for our world [to] change in the moment that God became one with us: when God chose to enter into humanity: when God became a child, embracing the limitations, embracing the pain, the suffering, the struggle of one of us.

As Jesus grew and lived out his ministry, he invited us to join with him, so that we are now able to transcend a normal, mundane life. We, too, get to enter into this story. We, too, have the opportunity to join into this greater thing that God has created: he has brought together our material realm, the spiritual realm, and the Kingdom of God is available to each of us.

We now have the opportunity to be a part of the work that Jesus is doing. That is the new beginning of Christmas.

So as you consider this evening or tomorrow, if you are challenged to review back on 2017 and consider what 2018 could be, let us be the people of God who recognize that we live in this new beginning that Jesus has brought to us. We live in this epic story and we get to be part of what God is doing, and that is worth celebrating. That is worth joy. That is worth having the festival and exchanging gifts, and playing games, and getting together with family, and celebrating traditions.

Let us embrace this joy and this new beginning in this Christmas season. Amen.