

Christmas Eve several years ago was like most others: intently looking over bulletins, checking in with musicians, just trying to make sure everything was ready and in-place to make worship just “right.” Because, yes, we will admit that, for us in the church, tonight is a rather big deal, and we just want it to go “right.” And that seemed to be the case that particular December 24th evening until we got to the sermon, when I was rambling on about I don’t even remember, quite honestly; and, all of a sudden, this young child ran down the center aisle and plopped himself down right in front of the altar with this huge smile on his face, acting like it was no big deal at all what he just did for everyone to see.

Of course, being the young naïve preacher that I am now, and even more so then, I had no earthly idea what to do. This was *not* part of the seminary training that I can remember, at least. And so, I just...kept on going, acting like I agreed with the young man that what he was doing was no big deal at all, while, also, acting as if the people in the pews were listening to a single word I was saying, as if they were expending any mental energy except to obsess over how long it was going to be before the parent made the awkward walk up the center aisle for all the Christmas Eve congregants to witness, to

convince their child to make their way back to their seat, immediately. After all, those onlookers wanted this night to go just “right,” too. This was the night when all their family came together for a home-cooked meal like ‘ole times, open presents together, play games, and yes, for once a year, worship together as a whole family. They just wanted it all to go “right,” and this child was undoubtedly messing it all up.

He was messing up this emotional, almost divine, momentum that happens every Christmas Eve, when we build up to that sacred moment of turning down all the lights and igniting the candles in front of us and singing the song that even the youngest of children can understand. But it’s not just about the candles and the song: it’s as if when you turn off the surrounding lights, you’re, also, turning off the noise that has built up over the entire year. You’re shutting out all the hatred and divisions and evil that seem to conspire together to define our whole existence. For that one moment, every Christmas Eve, a precious bit of the peaceful serenity of heaven itself comes down into our safe-haven of a sanctuary. It’s as if in that incredibly sacred set of a few minutes of time; *that* is the closest we get to Bethlehem.

Now, I will be the first to admit I have absolutely zero evidence to support what I am about to say. I obviously have no audio recordings of that night thousands of years ago, but I would be willing to bet that there were other babies around the vicinity as well, some of whom were screaming at the top of their lungs. There were even adults walking the streets, scared out of their mind about this Roman Empire, what it meant for their families and for generations to follow. There were parents in their homes rustling through trying to prepare for what needed to be done the next day, to ensure any food be put on the table at all. With all that being said, I have this sneaking suspicion, that it was not a completely silent night.

And the truth is...I wouldn't want it to be, because I cling to this Great News of God joining us in our chaos, in our day-to-day imperfect lives, in our fears and worries and uncertainties galore that combine to make us scream, too. This is not the God who waited around for us to get quiet first, who would not dare come down unless we acted and behaved in such a way that would somehow, then, be deserving of a bit of heaven coming down to us. This is the God who came down anyway, and ironically enough, emerged in the form of a baby, who would join in the cries of all ages throughout the world that night.

So, looking back to that Christmas Eve several years ago, as much I was emotionally and spiritually moved, yet again, by another Silent Night rendition by candlelight; I wonder if the closest we got to Bethlehem that night was when the child ran up for us all to see and refused to budge at all. Is it possible *that* is exactly what Jesus did in us? That he *ran* into our hearts, and he didn't even check with us to see if we were ready for it! He just invited his grace-filled self in, that kind of grace that even if we didn't offer him a room at all, he still burst through anyway.

And, come to think of it, as that child looked out on all of us in the sanctuary that Christmas Eve, all of us with our different reasons to be there, and moral values record, and various points on our respective journeys of faith, he still unleashed the same smile, almost as if the Christ child did the same for the entire world for all times. And, beyond our human understanding, through it all, no matter what, ever since, he has absolutely refused to budge away from any of us. Evidently, tonight, we celebrate what is just the beginning. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!