

Message: "The Art of Good Beginnings"

Scripture Lesson: John 1:1-14

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it. ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. ¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God. ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

You may not know this about my wife and me, but we are serious movie buffs. Well, serious movie buffs in the sense that we are addicted to the most syrupy, corny, romantical, kitschy kinds of movies that younger people would watch and ask "why?" Some of our favorites include Brigadoon, the Music Man, My Fair Lady, Mary Poppins, and, of course, the Sound of Music. We have a particular selection of these types of movies that we watch at this time of year, Christmas movies, including The Bishop's Wife, It's A Wonderful Life, the animated Christmas Carol, White Christmas, and, of course, How the Grinch Stole Christmas. Anyone here seen all of these? If so, you know what I mean - these are corny and simplistic and warm and fuzzy contrivances that are designed for one thing - to grab the heart. They go for the center of one's being in terms of seasonal affection and holiday warmth; corny as they are, they work!

Well, the other day I was blessed to be watching my granddaughter Alva for the entire day; but it was bitterly cold outside, so our normal walk was out. So were outside games and playing around the yard; this was going to be an entirely indoors day. I discovered what all grandparents discover while watching a very active, inquisitive grandchild on a cold winter's day which demand inside games and projects and reading - it is amazing how fast you can run out of things to do! Well, we had reached the point where Alva was getting bored, so I had a brilliant idea - it's close to Christmas, we've got several Christmas movies to choose from - I know: WE'LL HAVE A MOVIE DAY!

Well, a movie moment at least. I looked into our vault of videos for something appropriate - *The Nightmare Before Christmas* was out, as was the newer version of the *Grinch*; she probably wouldn't understand a lot of adult dialogue like that found in *The Bishop's Wife*, or stay with the pretty random plot of *White Christmas*. I couldn't find our DVD of *Miracle on 34th Street*, and *Home Alone* was a bit too violent as was *Edward Scissorhands*. And no way was I showing her *Die Hard*! I looked and looked, and finally my eyes came to rest on a favorite of my childhood - the Rankin/Bass stop-motion animation masterpiece called "The Little Drummer Boy." I loved that movie because I could relate to it in many ways - I was once a little boy, I was a drummer, I didn't like people (I was very shy), I liked animals, and I liked the story about the manger. I watched that show every chance I got - and yes, it was very corny.

But I didn't think Alva had seen it. So, I put it on, wondering what her reaction to it would be. Her reaction was amazing. She was mesmerized, captivated, full of wonder at the sight - not of the movie, which I think she found really boring, but at the sight of her grandpa crying! I was also really surprised at the tears which came to my eyes as I watched that old, corny, kitschy, warm and fuzzy movie, for I am not known as a person or pastor of strong sentimentality - but there I was, wiping away the tears as Arron, the drummer boy, brought his hurt sheep to the stall, wanting Jesus to heal him, but having no gift to share except for sharing a simple rhythm on his drum. He offered what he had, with all that he had, and God received it gladly. That was all it took - Arron offering his pure heart to Jesus.

So, why did I cry?

I cried because of a memory that touched my heart long ago.....I cried because I resonated with something deep inside me that recognized something of the divine in the world.....I cried as I was reminded that the intention behind our gifts to God matter much more than the gifts themselves.....I cried because I saw in Arron the lost and poor of the world who have lost so much and yet gain the favored attention of God.....I cried because sometimes it's important to let our hearts be touched by God, to go deeper into the reason behind all things, to understand that we are not alone, and that God cares for us all.

Christmas is a time when we should allow ourselves to be sentimental, to feel deeply what is going on around that strange scene of long ago, with star overhead and barnyard animals in attendance, with the strange company of kings and shepherds gazing in wonder over it all. We do need to be careful, however, of

over sentimentalizing the things of God; it is far too easy to replace God with emotion, remaining in the joy of the manger and forsaking all that comes after, including the cross; far too many people excitedly proclaim their faith selectively, making sure their faith fits into the lives they desire rather than fitting their lives into the faith represented by Jesus. And the former is much easier than the latter.

But we also must be careful not to lose the heart of God which is perhaps most evident in the miracle of a child; we must be careful to not forget the reason behind every sign and wonder which takes our breath away; we must be careful to not reduce the divine to an unimpassioned entity or a cold, metaphysical reality. Christmas, in this sense, represents the heart of God revealed in the form of Jesus, revealed for the sake of the world, revealed for the sake of each one of us. Our hearts should be touched.