

I'd Have to Be One of Them

Luke 2:1-20

Thursday, December 22, 2011, "Eve Before You Leave"

Saturday, December 24, 2011, Christmas Eve

Orion UMC

Rev. Dave Schultz

Almost every time I read this passage—especially in the traditional King James Version—I see in my mind's eye Linus—one of the Peanuts characters—reciting it from memory on the stage of his grade school auditorium.

It's a familiar scene coming near the end of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. This year that half-hour cartoon is 46 years old and just as relevant today as it was in 1965.

The show centers on Charlie Brown who wants to discover the true meaning of Christmas. He's depressed because he feels as though Christmas has become too commercialized with glitzy decorations like "big, shiny aluminum Christmas trees," greedy children who think Christmas is about nothing more than getting presents—preferably in the form of cash and modernizing the ancient story.

If Charlie Brown he felt that way in 1965, imagine how he'd feel today!

In an effort to overcome his seasonal depression, Charlie Brown goes to see a psychiatrist, who, of course, is none other than Lucy, one of the Peanuts gang.

Lucy advises Charlie Brown to get more involved in Christmas by directing the school nativity play. Charlie Brown agrees but quickly decides that the play needs "the proper mood," so he goes looking for a Christmas tree. He soon zeros in on a tiny, pathetic tree—but it happens to be the only real tree on the lot.

As the story unfolds, that tree symbolizes the true meaning of Christmas. So what is Christmas all about? It's about discovering something that is real and alive. Charlie Brown's Christmas tree may be tiny and even pathetic, but it was the only tree around that was real and living.

Christmas is filled with things that are not real—they may look real; they may feel real. But nothing in this world is as real as the Babe who long ago was wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

Today the assault on Christianity has become so severe and so full of ignorance that recently I happened across an atheist's blog who said, "*If Jesus Christ ever existed...*" It used to be that atheists would acknowledge that Jesus lived and taught among us. They denied that he was and is the divine Son of God, but accepted him as a teacher—even a good teacher. Now it seems as though atheists they won't even do that, despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

And yet, there has never been anyone or anything that has been more real than Jesus Christ. When Mary laid her Baby in that manger, she placed in that manger the Ultimate Reality of the Universe. I may look real to you and you look real to me, but any reality we have can only be because Christ is real and Christ was real before we ever came to be. Were it not for Christ, we would not be. Any reality which we enjoy today is rooted the reality of Jesus who was real before this world came into being.

John said it this way: "All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of (humanity)" (John 1:3).

Jesus himself said, "Before Abraham was, I Am" (John 8:58). Jesus is our Ultimate Reality.

Christmas is filled with things that are not living—they may look as though they're alive and they may feel as though they're alive. But nothing in this world is as full of life as that "Infant Lowly, Infant Holy."

Jesus himself said, "I have come that you may have life and you might have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

Christmas is not about commercialization or greed; Christmas is about discovering what is truly real and what is truly alive. The most important gift we can open at Christmastime is the gift of life that was purchased for us at Calvary's tree.

Christmas is about encountering for yourself Jesus Christ. The shepherds met him. The wise men met him too. Christmas comes every year to ask us not to buy the biggest gifts we can find, but to ask us: have you found the life and the reality that can only be found in Jesus Christ?

Charlie Brown was still trying to figure that out. Finally in aggravation he cries out, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Linus takes his thumb out of his mouth and simply says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." He walks over to center stage, asks for the lights to be adjusted, clutches his blue blanket and with the simplicity and innocence of a child recites Luke 2, verses 8 through 14. Then he returns to Charlie Brown and says, "...And that's what Christmas is all about, Charlie Brown."

Harriet Van Horne of the New York World-Telegram said, "Linus' reading of the story of the Nativity was, quite simply, the dramatic highlight of the season." Other critics had nothing but praise as well for the scene.

Ironically, network executives originally did not want Linus to recite Luke's account of the birth of Christ; even though the entire scene clocks in at just 77 seconds, they assumed that viewers would not want to sit through a reading from the Bible—especially if it was from the King James Version. But creator Charles Schulz was adamant about keeping this scene in. He said, "If we don't tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?"

I love the fact that Charles Schulz had a child share his faith in Christ, and to do so as simply and as elegantly as Linus does.

The message of Christmas is not a complicated message. The message of Christmas is quite simply that one Christmas night two thousand years ago God himself stepped out of eternity and entered into our humble existence.

I think that the God-born-in-a-manger business escapes some moderns because they seek complex answers to their questions and this one is so utterly simple. And so for the cynics, the skeptics and the unconvinced, I submit this modern parable.¹ It's about a modern man—someone just like any one of us.

This man is not a Scrooge. Rather, he was a kind, decent man; a mostly good man, generous to his family and upright in his dealings with others. But he did not believe in all that incarnation stuff which preachers like me proclaim at this time of year. This man just couldn't swallow the Jesus story about God coming to earth as a man and he was too honest of a man to pretend otherwise.

So when Christmas Eve came around he said to his wife and children, "I'm not going to church with you. I'd feel like a hypocrite. I'd just as soon stay home."

So he stayed; his family went.

Shortly after the family drove away, snow began to fall. He went to the window to watch the flurries as they got heavier and heavier. Then he went back to his easy chair and returned to his book.

Minutes later he was startled by a thud against his window pane. Then another. And another.

¹ Adapted from a column by Lou Cassels. For many years Lou wrote "Religion in America" which was syndicated by United Press International in over 400 newspapers. He died in 1974.

At first he thought that someone must be throwing snowballs against the living room window, but when he went outside to investigate he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. In a desperate search for shelter they had tried to fly through his large landscape window.

Well, he couldn't let the poor creatures lie there and freeze. He thought of the barn where they stabled a pony: that would provide the birds with a warm shelter if he could direct them to it.

He quickly put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on a light for the birds. Then he tried catching them. He tried shooing them into the barn by walking around them, waving his arms. Instead they just scattered in every direction except into the warm, lighted barn.

Then he realized they were afraid of him. "To them," he reasoned, "I am a strange and terrifying creature. If only I could think of a way to let them know that they can trust me—that I'm not trying to hurt them; I'm only trying to help them find a safe place. But how?"

Any move he made tended to frighten them or confuse them. They would not follow. They would not be led or shooed because they feared the man.

"If only I could be a bird myself," he reasoned. "If only I could be a bird and mingle with them and speak their language and tell them not to be afraid. I could show them the way to the safe, warm barn. But I'd have to be one of them so they could see. And hear. And understand."

At that moment the church bells began to ring: Merry Christmas! He listened to the bells pealing the glad tidings of old. And in that moment, he sank to his knees in the snow and prayed.

That, my friends, is what Christmas is all about.