

Christmas Eve 2014

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I remember reading a few years ago in one of the New York papers a little article that reported a few days before Christmas about a certain barber from Queens, 19 year old Luis Gonzalez, who was on his way from his barber shop one early evening in December when from a distance he heard a cry for help. As Luis continued to walk the cry became more distinct. It was the sound of a man's voice yelling for help. It was gridlock traffic there in Queens and he saw the man standing beside his Ford Escort stuck in that traffic in a panic, "Hey," cried the man, "I need help. My wife is having a baby." So Luis made his run for the man and the car and about the same time came running a group of skateboarders responding to the same cry. By the time they arrived birth was underway. Luis and the skateboarders glanced into the car – to see more than what they wanted to see – and off went the skateboarders to the local police precinct that happened to be just down the street to get some help and onto his cell phone went Luis to call 911. In a New York minute officers came running, squad cars began parting ways through the traffic – and with mommy and now new baby girl in the back seat and daddy in front behind the wheel off they went with sirens blazing and lights flashing preparing the way for Queen's newest baby and her arrival at Elmhurst Hospital. The nurses and doctors agreed with mom and dad -- how could they not name their first born Advent daughter, Christina.

Hollywood could not have scripted it better. A baby in a back seat discovered by a barber and skateboarders and the good men in blue, escorting the Escort and when all was said and done, they named her first born child, Christina. Hollywood could not have scripted it better because

Hollywood is always one step removed from life. Real life. Though Sony Pictures is discovering a little about real life. Real life with its traffic jams and change of plans and cancellations and disappointments and surprises and terrorist threats and worries about what might next happen. Real life with the unscheduled arrival of a baby. And with her gravity. It's what real life brings – gravity. Great gravity. Gravity to stop everyone in their tracks. That's what real life can do – stop, at least for a moment, even a city.

The Gospel writer Luke must not have attended script writing school – because if he had he would have never ended up with the story we just heard from his second chapter. Luke tells us a real story about real people. You can't make this stuff up. Dispossessed teenagers pregnant outside of wedlock. A distant emperor who doesn't care where people have to go to get counted. An indifferent innkeeper who has a business to run – sorry pal, you should have made reservations. There's an app for that on your smartphone. Grubby shepherds out in the field trying to stay warm. A stable with even less sterility than a Ford Escort. Real life. Gravity. The whole story weighs with the hard stuff of earth. No one here is catching a break. No one here gets handed hot cocoa under the mistletoe. No one here hears carols in the background. This is the hard stuff of life. Gravity. That which holds everything down to the dusty earth.

"This is what incarnation means," writes Frederick Buechner, "It is untheological. It is unsophisticated. It is undignified. But according to Christianity, it is the way things are." Enter a child and all things stop in their tracks.

Incarnation means the hard stuff of life. Gravity. That which holds everything close to earth.

So was it the law of gravity that pulled down from the heavens the Lord and Creator of the universe? Was it the law of divine gravity that compelled the God of heaven to descend down to earth. Down to the dusty unsterile earth. Is this a down to earth God? The founder of all mercies who can't help but to put himself at our mercy? The Creator and King who cannot stay away? For what could be more real than this – the Father who sees his children struggling – living in the real life –

with its sadness and wonder and shock and terror and protests and unscheduled arrivals and worry for what might happen – what good Father would not move heaven and earth to join his children in the joy and pain of it all?

Be not afraid, said the angel to the shepherds, for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will be for all the people – for unto you is born this day in the city of David – a Savior. Unto who? Scrubby shepherds keeping themselves warm next to a couple of sheep and with the help maybe from a few swigs from a flask? Unto who? they say. Unto you, says the angel. Unto you and the barber and the skateboarders. And the doctors and the nurses and the men in blue. And the wisemen who are on their way. And the heavenly host getting ready to sing, Glory. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God who puts himself lowest. Born to who? Homeless teenagers, and uncouth shepherds? Can we get Hollywood in here for a rewrite? Better not. We'd lose the glory. Glory to the God of gravity. Glory in the lowest.

So I am thinking tonight of a home down Bee Ridge Rd. Those of us who live off Bee Ridge Rd. East of 75 know that the whole stretch is under construction to widen the road. The result of it is that many homes and families have been relocated to make room for the road and some have not. And those homes that have remained and the families within them are living in the middle of a major road construction project. Bulldozers, dump trucks, jackhammers. And I am thinking about one home in particular. A very humble home. One home not lucky enough to get the government payout to move. Right on the edge of the dump trucks and bulldozers and the snarling traffic. I don't know the family. But for them not only is it dump trucks and bulldozers, but what they've done is that they have taken hundreds and hundreds of cubic feet of dirt from one side of the road and have built this mountain of dirt – I'm talking 25 feet high and 100 feet long right next to – I mean five feet next to – this little house. A mountain of dirt twice the height of this house sitting five feet away. And I have been feeling so bad for these people. But then a couple weeks ago what do I see? Christmas lights. Christmas lights all over the outside of this house in the dark shadows of this ugly

mountain. Christmas lights. Me – I'd be cursing the darkness – but they are lighting a light against the darkness. Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God in the lowest.

Perhaps that's what they thought one hundred years ago tonight - when in the throes of World War I, with thousands of men dying on either side - on that first Christmas Eve of the war they called a truce and met on Flander's Fields, exchanged gifts and sang "Silent Night, Holy Night." Glory to God in the highest. Glory to God in the lowest.

"What is the glory of God?" asked the great preacher, Paul Scherer. "What is the glory of God? The majesty that had nowhere to lay its head; the grandeur that was meek and lowly; the beauty that had neither form nor comeliness that anyone should desire him; the splendor of a lonely Wanderer, weary and footsore, with nails through his hands and feet ... I have found in and through him all the God I want. And when I celebrate the day of his birth, I celebrate the day when God made himself so manifest that we have not been able to get away from him."

I don't imagine Luis Gonzalez and his skateboard friends and the men in blue have ever been able to get away from that crying little girl in the back seat, do you? She was just too real. And isn't that why we're here tonight – because God had made himself just so real. We just can't get away. We don't want to get away from what we've once seen.

It reminds me of one of George Johnston's poems:

Dear child, dear little child,

Hardly into the world,

A few weeks into our

Cold you intrude your fire

For us to warm ourselves.

Look kindly on our eyes

That gaze down into yours

To quicken our low fires.

It's why we can't stay away. He is just too real. The eyes that look kindly into ours. Shepherds, barbers and skateboarders. Bankers, doctors and lawyers. Whose low fires long to be quickened.