

December 24, 2021 Christmas Eve

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Luke 2:1-20

"The Highwire"

Douglas T. King

"Twas the night before Christmas,

when all through the house

Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse;"

This is the start of a poem penned by Clement Clarke Moore which often comes to mind on Christmas Eve. But tonight I want to take you to a different poet, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and the start of his poem, "Constantly Risking Absurdity."

"Constantly risking absurdity

and death

whenever he performs

above the heads

of his audience

the poet like an acrobat

climbs on rime

to a high wire of his own making

I do admit it is quite a shift from jolly old saint Nick and his belly as a bowl full of jelly to some lean and lithe acrobat on a highwire, but it is a shift worthy of our consideration.

The Christmas Eve worship service is a bit of a highwire act. We are all coming to the end of a long day in what has been a long season. Trees have been trimmed. Guests have been welcomed. Meals have been cooked. Gifts have been wrapped. We are weary and ready for a rest. And yet we have gathered this night to share in worship together; to hear the story yet again; to be moved by the music; and perhaps to catch a glimpse of just what happened all those years ago on the night of the birth of Jesus. The quest for an epiphany in the midst of exhaustion.

Luke gives us so much in these verses. His mention of Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius places the birth of Jesus in the real history of the world. The birth in Bethlehem, the hometown of King David, reminds us that we are receiving a new king. The fact that the angels come to shepherds, the lowest on the totem pole of society at that time teaches us that God has a special place in God's heart for those we often overlook. The angelic proclamation of "good news of great joy for all the people" and of "a Savior" tells us that the one being born comes to save the entire world.

But tonight I want to focus on the very spare details we get of Jesus' actual birth. It only rates a single verse in the entire gospel. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Luke may be the most

gifted of the gospel writers, his Greek is unparalleled in its eloquence. His intentionality is without question. So it is no coincidence when we fast forward in the gospel to its end, to Jesus in the tomb that he is "wrapped in a linen cloth, and laid in rock-hewn tomb where no one had ever been laid." Just as he was "wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

The biblical scholar Luke Timothy Johnson asks the question "So...birth and burial mirror each other?" (Johnson, p. 53) They do in the gospel of Luke, and frankly they do in life. To be born is to die one day. We live our lives on that highwire. Merry Christmas, everybody! That is some message on this night when we are weary and just want to warm our hearts beside the glow of the manger.

But it is a truth, a truth we most often keep at arm's length, but a truth nonetheless. And certainly it is not a truth we want before us on Christmas. There was an episode of the TV show MASH which spoke to this. For those of you for whom MASH is before your time it was about an Army surgical hospital in the Korean War.

In the episode entitled, "Death Takes a Holiday" a mortally wounded soldier named Denny Flanigan arrives at the hospital on Christmas Day. There is no way he can ever recover. But as BJ, Margaret, and Hawkeye learn of his wife and two children they decide to do everything they can to keep him alive so he will not die on Christmas, but rather the day after. They struggle and struggle and struggle to keep him alive, to keep him on that highwire for just a few more minutes. But when he dies they look

up at the clock to discover it is only 11:25 PM, on Christmas. They are all crestfallen. Then Hawkeye goes over to the clock and moves the minute hand to five minutes past twelve, 12:05 AM, December twenty-sixth. Margaret is hesitant to falsify a death certificate but the priest, Father Mulcahy remarks, "Christmas should be thought of as a day of birth." As they leave the operating room they hear the hymn, "O Holy Night" coming from the mess tent.

I can never watch that episode without welling up with tears. But of course we know that death never actually takes a holiday. We only choose to take a holiday from thinking about it. The thing is, Father Mulcahy was only half right. Yes, Christmas is a day of birth. But it is about so much more than that. The birth of Jesus ushers immortality into the world. The nativity is the opening act in the defeat of death. Death does not disappear but death moves from an ultimate reality to a penultimate one. We still walk the highwire of our mortality. But now, because of this babe in the manger, a place beyond the highwire has been created for us.

Christmas is very much about mortality and the power of God's love to lead us beyond it. Because we know that Jesus will slip loose the bonds of that linen cloth. He will step out of that rock-hewn tomb. And he will invite us to join him. This is indeed good news of great joy for all the people.

Each of us walks that highwire, constantly risking absurdity and death. For each of us and all of us, death is an ever present possibility. It is said that the Greek playwright Aeschylus was killed by a falling tortoise shell dropped by an

eagle." (Weiner, p. 275) We are so absurdly vulnerable. The past year and a half has certainly taught us that.

But Christmas is the turning of that tide. Perhaps not from our vulnerability. In fact, God runs headlong into the midst of our vulnerability, being born as a helpless infant, in a manger no less. This vulnerable one born this night has joined us on the highwire of our mortality. But this same one, Jesus Christ, walks before us on the highwire and has slipped a rope around our waists. We shall never fall. He will lead us forward, to a place beyond death.

Later in his poem, Ferlinghetti writes of that journey on the highwire

"toward the still higher perch
where Beauty stands and waits..."

This night is all about that higher perch. This night is all about where ultimate beauty stands and waits for us. Christmas is about much higher stakes than a warm and cuddly feeling as we watch a cooing babe in the candlelight. Tonight we welcome immortality into our midst. Even in our weariness this is the kind of good news that is worthy of exuberant celebration.

Tomorrow, as you find yourself surrounded by the remnants of wrapping paper strewn about, and for some of you the jubilant cries of little ones overwhelmed with excitement, take a moment, and remember the gift that comes this day. We receive the defeat of death by one who comes to us as the most vulnerable of all, a babe in a manger. We are indeed being led

"toward the still higher perch

where Beauty stands and waits..."

In the words of that jolly old elf, "Happy Christmas to all and to all a good night."

Thanks be to God. Amen.

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina Series*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1991.