

**Sermons at Trinity
December 14, 2008**

Trinity @ 7

The Rev. R. Cameron Miller

There is a story from the Hasidic tradition told by Elie Wiesel, and it goes like this:

WHEN the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayers." And again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All can do is to tell the story, and that must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

God made humankind because God loves stories.

All religions have stories.

Spiritual wisdom is not *taught*

so much as it is *told*.

**In fact, when I teach my Introduction to Religion
class at Canisius College,**

I teach the three Abrahamic Faiths

by helping the students to discover

the *Primal Narrative* of each religion.

In other words,

what is the *primal story*

upon which the religion is built?

For Judaism it is Moses & the Exodus.

For Christianity it is Jesus & the resurrection.

For Islam it is Mohammed & the 23 year revelation.

Buddha's journey to the Middle Way

is also a primal story.

Hinduism is full of stories

and I haven't a clue which one is primal.

But stories matter.

The stories we tell,

and how we tell our story

is powerful.

I have been thinking about that

as Christmas approaches

because we are surrounded by the sentimentalization,

and the secularization,

of the Christmas story.

It's kinda yucky.

**What we see and hear is the domesticated
and white-washed
images of crèche scenes
rather than the primal or original Christmas story
as told by Matthew or Luke.**

**The primal story is told in Liberationist images
of Empire, poverty and power
not an hygienic birth with a smiling Virgin.**

**But you and I live in an anti-story moment of history;
one of the few
if not only
anti-story moments in history.**

We live in the Age of Information
when *information* delivers the news
and presumably the truth
about the world we live in and how we are to live.

The Age of Information,
as incredible as it may seem,
has actually reduced our field of vision
so that our gaze
has become *stuck*
in a crevice of death and evil;
in contrast to the primal Christmas story
that has death and evil in it too
but also points to an alternative reality within it.

**So I am not suggesting
we should in any way
deny the presence of human evil in our world,
or the dark side of the human mind;
but the Information Age and its technology
captures our vision
and focuses it upon the horrific,
the pornographic,
and the darkness of murderous hearts
and demonic minds.**

**You see,
genocide and violent crime;
chaos, hatred, and bigotry;
economic cannibalism
and environmental prostitution...**

AIDS,

Cancer

and the ever-presence of death and destruction

in all of its forms,

and our impotence to alter them,

are what dominate our field of vision

in the Information Age.

Why?

Because all of those things

are information that is *lucrative*

and the Age of Information is not driven by

ever-improving technology

it is driven by greed

and other market forces.

**This is the crack
into which we are herded like cattle,
and this is the *lens*
for which we have all been fitted.**

**The Information Age
provides a lens
through which to seek and know the world –
this information is not the world itself
but only a lens
through which to *interpret* the world.
You see the difference?**

**Increasingly, it is a lens whose field of vision
is narrow
and whose depth of field is shallow.**

**When the primary lens
through which we view and interpret the world
has as its focus darkness and death,
then the very thin veil
between God and Creation
thickens rather tapers.**

**Again, I am not denying the reality of evil
nor doubting the actuality
of the horrifically awful things we see and hear about,
but a lens that filters all we see
through a tint of such darkness,
is a lens that reduces our vision of holiness.**

**That rabbinical story from Elie Wiesel suggests
that there is another lens, a corrective lens.**

**You see,
stories are lenses;
and *primal* stories
offer a primary lens through which to filter the world.**

**There is no such thing
as pure information –
it is always filtered
whether by CNN,
the Discovery Channel,
the Exodus
or the Christmas story.**

**We are all wearing lenses
whether we know it or not,
but much of the time
we assume we are living life without a filter.**

**Recognizing the filters we have been given,
and choosing which filters we will wear,
is what spiritual growth and maturation is all about.**

**So to go back to the Christmas story for a moment,
all the rituals and religious rah-rah done around
this time of year;**

all the religious religiosity that is created;

all the huffing and puffing of preachers;

all the high-toned voices of singers;

all the earnest prayers of congregations;

it all comes down to the story

told at the center of the hooplah –

that mid-winter story

that Christians surround

with a festival of light and a passion for gift-giving.

What we need to recognize...

is that story is an alternative lens.

That story is the interpretive lens

through which the world is known

and through which our lives are lived

in considerable contrast

to the Information Age lens.

But please,

when I talk about the Christmas story as a lens,

I am not talking about those bogus,

fear-mongering threats of Hell

that some Christians use to scare people

into affiliation

and for contributions.

**In the filter through which I discern God anyway,
the Creator loves us
whether we choose to see the world
through the lens of holiness
or the lens of technologically delivered information.**

But what greater choice could we have?

What more interesting contrast could there be?

The *Information Age lens*,

slick,

powerful,

all pervasive

and funneled through the lucrative channel

of cynicism and darkness,

verses the little old *Christmas story lens*.

**The Christmas story lens
is humble to a fault,
with its suggestion that God
is born into a human life
through an oppressed and marginalized family
who are endangered
by the people like us
who are in the story.**

**The Christmas lens
sees everything that the Information Age lens sees
but,
and here is the difference,
its field of vision is wider
and its depth of field is deeper.**

The Christmas story lens (the primal one)

does not have a profit-motive

but it is prophetic.

The Christmas story lens

sees all there is to see

and then reminds us

that neither death camps nor cholera

nor virginity nor AIDS

are prohibitive to God.

The Christmas Story lens

reminds us that neither

cancer nor cynicism

can limit the presence of God.

**The Christmas story lens,
as opposed to the Information Age lens,
insists that in the end,
wherever that is,
God has the last word not death and not evil.**

**But the important thing here
is what lens we chose to filter our information through.**

**It could be any number of stories
from any one of the spiritual traditions,
or it could be an ideology
or one of the many sciences,
or a combination of them all.**

**It is a funny thing to think about,
this idea
that the lens through which we choose
to interpret the world
will also determine
what we finally understand
about God and life and ourselves...
It is a quirky idea too.**

**The acknowledgment that,
conscious of it or not,
we already have a primary lens
means we get choose which one we want.**

**It means we ought to wake up
and figure out
which lens we're using
and who gave it to us,
and why they wanted us to wear in the first place.**

**So I invite us to listen to the Christmas story again,
as if for the first time this year;
look through it
and see what kind of vision it offers.**

**But now...
tonight...in the music and as we light candles...
take a peek and see if you can discern
what and whose
lens you are wearing. Is it the one you want?**