

Blue Christmas Worship – 6:00 p.m. Sunday December 14, 2014
Once Upon a Time – Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Once upon a time ... once upon a wonder
When old man Harold Quincy lived next door.
Old and “weird” – or so my sister said,
Who knew somewhat of life;
She was nine years wise.

I was four and feared the Quincy place,
Where, it was said, Harold spent his time
Talking to his chickens.
Backyard bantams, mostly,
A few Rhode Island Reds,
Which scratched and scavenged, clucking now and then,
To keep their chicks in tow. I stayed away,
But sometimes heard him mumbling through the hedge.
And once or twice I peeped
And saw the battered hat he wore
And noticed rusty stains in his mustache.
“Oh. That!” my mother said and sniffed.
“Tobacco juice. He chews.”
And so I peeped some more.
To watch him spit.
He did, though mostly what he did
Was talk. And not just to the hens.
Sometimes I heard him talking ... well ... to God.
At least I thought so then. Who knows?
Perhaps his “Precious Lord’s” were something else instead.
And on his cheeks the tears I thought were tears were not.

But anyway, I wondered.
And then when Christmas came that year,

I wondered when we sang that song in church
You know, the one where Harold's angels
Sing, "Glory" to the newborn king.
The king, I thought was Jesus.
God's son. And Mary's.
Her father owned a donkey,
 And looked after sheep,
 And was under the haystack, fast asleep,
 One cold winter's night that was so deep,
 When the angels' singing woke him up.
Harold's angels, wings feathered like his hens.
A wonder!

But, as my daughter likes to tell me,
In her nine-years world-wise voice,
"That was then, Dad, then.
This is *now!*" And I know she is right.
Now it is indeed. And what a now it is,
This now where
 Terrorist alerts have colors
 Ebola virus is epidemic,
 And the poorest poor still die.

In such a now the best of all good-news
Is still the tale, time-tattered,
Of holiness enfleshed.
Into this, *our now*, he comes.
He comes. No less a wonder *Now* than *Then*.
He comes ...
This man who calls himself a mother hen
And tucks the lost, chilled chicks into a feathered nest.
He comes ... to us,
With Harold's angels healing in his wings.ⁱ

And so that poem was penned by a man named Kenneth L. Gable, almost thirty years ago, at a time when my dear daughter was nine-years world-wise. And it made me think, *then*, of times when my life, too, was once upon a time.

In those thirty years since, quite a bit has changed. I've been on both some beautiful mountain tops, and I've been through some valleys of deep pain ... pain

that I probably could not have endured, had it not been for remembering ... remembering back to “once upon a time” when Jesus’ Friendship was all I had to hold onto ... and it was enough. Sometimes, just barely. But always, it has been enough ... even when I wasn’t so sure, until I looked back into the rear view mirror, and realized it was so.

Christmas, we remember, is that “once upon a time” when an unwed pregnant woman was told that some day she would be called blessed by all the world. And so she chose to claim her predicament as her life preserver, because she believed that somehow God was in this, like the angel had said.

- In times, when relationships have gone sour ...
- In times, when loved ones have hovered near to the doorway into the next world ... sometimes coming back and sometimes going on through ...
- In seasons of life where the “now” is so much changed from what it used to be “back then,” that we feel lost, or, if not lost, without any significant road markers or hand holds that we recognize ...

“Once upon a time,” we fantasize, was better then. But it was just *THEN*, and now is *NOW*. And some day we will also see *TODAY* as “once upon a time.”

And in each “once upon a time”

he ***still*** comes.

He comes. No less a wonder *Now* than *Then*.

He comes ...

This man who calls himself a mother hen

And tucks the lost, chilled chicks into a feathered nest.

He comes ... to us,

With Harold’s angels healing in his wings.

What is there to celebrate

In the midst of affluence, if you are poor?

In the midst of family reunions, when you are alone?

In the midst of love, when you feel rejected?

What is there to celebrate

- *About the sparkling eyes of children when you are trying to deal with the deep scars of your own childhood?*
- *About angel choruses of peace on earth when you know the pain of war, and rumors of war that still keep on going?*
- *About preacher-talk of “goodwill on earth” when you have just lost your job?”ⁱⁱ*

“What is there to celebrate? Maybe nothing – if the spirit of celebration is reserved only for the light-hearted and the lucky. But [consider the story told] by Clarence Forsberg. One day he visited a little chapel out in the Pacific Northwest. It was a frame church and had stained glass windows and a beautiful altar. As he left the church, he stopped to sign the guest register. Leafing through the pages to see if he recognized any of the names, he spied one particular entry. No name was listed, just the date and the words, ‘Thank you for a place to cry.’”ⁱⁱⁱ

Once upon a time – in a place far away, ***and yet also right here*** – the Lord God made entrance into the world, to a people struggling, and without a single Christmas decoration adorning their temporary homeless shelter. And the Lord God came in flesh, to be with us, to suffer with us, and to let us know how much we are loved.

Sometimes, crying is about the only emotion we can show. And ***that*** is sometimes a great release from the torpor of emptiness where everything seems numb, as surely Mary and Joseph had experienced. And which Mary would not be immune from experiencing later, as well. And *she* was the Mother of God!

Celebration comes not just in parties and revelry. Sometimes it comes just in quiet memories and ponderings within. And sometimes the best celebration is the simple, quiet remembrance of an assurance once known, that:

he ***still*** comes.
 He comes. No less a wonder *Now* than *Then*.
 He comes ...
 This man who calls himself a mother hen
 And tucks the lost, chilled chicks into a feathered nest.
 He comes ... to us,
 With Harold’s angels healing in his wings.

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.

ⁱ Kenneth L. Gable (as adapted) from *alive now!*

ⁱⁱ Melvin E. Wheatley, *A Book of Christmas* (Upper Room 1988)

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*