

The Services for the Nativity of Jesus - Christmas - December 24 & 25, 2016  
Nigel Taber-Hamilton. St. Augustine's in-the-Woods, Freeland. John 1:1 - 14

*I ask them to take a poem and hold it up to the light like a color slide  
or press an ear against its hive.*

*I say drop a mouse into a poem and watch him probe his way out,  
or walk inside the poem's room and feel the walls for a light switch.*

*I want them to water-ski across the surface of a poem waving at the author's name on  
the shore.*

*But all they want to do is tie the poem to a chair with rope and torture a confession out  
of it.*

*They begin beating it with a hose to find out what it really means.*

That's a poem called "Introduction to Poetry" by former National Poet Laureate Billy Collins, which he wrote as he reflected on his day job as an English professor trying to teach about poetry.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century dancer Isadora Duncan was a little more concise when talking about what one of her dances meant: "*If I could tell you what it meant, there would be no point in dancing it,*" she said.

If you came here tonight expecting to hear the first 20 verses of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Chapter of Luke's gospel – you know, the bit that begins "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." – you'll have to go home and read it.

And if you came here tonight expecting me to tell you what the Christmas story means (whether from Luke or John's gospel) you're out of luck. There are some things in life that are diminished by explanatory language, not exposed by it and – at least tonight – this Christmas story is one of them.

I know that can be hard to hear. It's hard because we all live in an age dominated by science and it's methods, and the way science so often deals with something it doesn't understand is to try and reduce it to its core components – to take it apart to see how it works. Some biblical scholars do that to a text – take it apart piece by piece, to find out all about it.

But I think we all know that doesn't work so well – that it's not enough – when you enter into the realm of faith and spirituality. It would be like using chemicals on a majestic painting to dissolve the paint back to the original separate colors, as if that would somehow explain all the creative energy the painter invested in it, or reveal the message he or she intended to convey..

Billy Collins would laugh at applying that method to a painting – or to the Christmas story – and rephrase his penultimate line, saying that what we're doing to the biblical passage is "[tying it] to a chair with rope [in an effort to.....]torture a confession out of it.....beating [it] with a hose to find out what it really means."

I Back at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, in response to scientific method's encroachment into what some considered God's domain, some insecure Christians simply decide to take the contents of the bible literally. But to accept moving stars, and virgin births as literal has the same consequence as a scientific dissecting of the story: both reduce the enormous power of Christmas to "**only** a story," as if we can then simply file it away with the Easter Bunny as cute but lacking any real implications for our everyday lives. Both methods gut the Christmas story of its meaning - they make it less not more accessible; something easily set aside and forgotten when January's reality re-imposes itself on our lives.

On this night I invite you to step away from scientific method without also retreating into literalism. Instead, see scripture as one of the doorways through which – along with poetry or dance – we humans can encounter both Meaning and Truth. Some things can only be revealed by going through these doorways, and to do otherwise is to shatter the crystal prism that reveals the holy and sacred rainbow.

So step outside into the Christmas story's starlit night – it will open up all sorts of possibilities – such as the way that really powerful stories end up with all sorts of seemingly unlikely elaborations. I know that some of my friends railed against the addition of lobsters, octopuses, and whales to the nativity scene in the Christmas movie "Love Actually," but (actually) the metaphorical point's really quite profound: that God doesn't draw boundaries around who can and can't be drawn to a moment of encounter with this newborn child who represents so much of what we all long for: peace, community, family, love – that, in the end, the details don't quite matter so much if the outcome is meeting God...or meeting God again.

Considering that most of us are not shepherds, Eastern wise man, camels or farm animals this is particularly good news for all of us!

Tonight less is more, a moment that reminds us that when words are dissected a story can so easily be disemboweled. When that happens, Meaning and Truth become collateral damage. Tonight is a moment when Meaning and Truth are accessible through the poetry of a midnight journey, a difficult birth among farm animals, moving stars and singing angels, shepherds and wise visitors from the East – when we allow the mystery to **be** mystery, allow its tantalizing power to move through us like a gentle breeze; when we admit to ourselves that though we don't know how, we **are** standing on the threshold of a sacred moment that calls us into silence, asks us simply to **be** in the presence of the Holy.

So we're in deep waters tonight, and no amount of explanation can help us to swim here – all we can do is let go and rely on the Spirit of God to keep us afloat, to hold us up. That's the invitation that the Christmas story annually issues: come and experience the wonder amid the bells, the carols, the candles; see the light that shines in the darkness, a light so bright that even the deepest darkness can't overcome it. This is the gateway to an authentic spiritual encounter, where you rely on your own sense without having someone else tell you what you are – or should be – experiencing.

John's Gospel invites exactly that: he paints on the broadest canvas possible: galaxies, stars,

suns, and emerging planets burst forth; all things shine through the divine artistry. Every human is enlightened by God.

So tonight, enter the Christmas story through John's imagery, the way Billy Collins wants you to enter into poetry: *hold [this story] up to the light like a color slide....press an ear against its hive.....drop a mouse into [the Christmas story] and watch him probe his way out, or walk inside [that ancient barn] and feel the walls for a [lantern and light it]...water-ski across the surface of [the Christmas story] waving at the [gospel writer's] name on the shore. [But don't EVER] tie the [the Christmas story] to a chair with rope [and try to] torture a confession out of it. [Don't EVER beat] it with a hose to find out what it really means.*

And know that if you can hold this amazing story up to the light like a color slide, and do all those other things, it will change your life; it will be with you every day of the year, not just on one evening when the darkness of sky and life threatens, and the light seems to be in such short supply.

The light we long for – not just the light of the Sun but the light that is hope, and joy, and peace and community and all those other values that make human existence meaningful and worth living for us all – the light we long for is the promise we here celebrate. So tonight, dream of enlightenment, wholeness, healing, and reconciliation, and joy and love; dream of light. For the people who have walked in darkness have seen a great light. We can all find our way, illumined by that glorious star of wonder, star of light, guided by its beauty bright.

May God be born in you this Christmas, and may your life never be the same again!