

***BUT IT'S CHRISTMAS***  
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University Congregational Church  
December 26, 2010

**Reading: Matthew 2:13-23 (New English Bible)**

**After they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and said to him, "Rise up, take the child and his mother and escape with them to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you; for Herod is going to search for the child to do away with him." So Joseph rose from sleep, and taking mother and child by night he went away with them to Egypt, and there he stayed till Herod's death. This was to fulfill what the Lord had declared through the prophet: "I called my son out of Egypt."**

**When Herod saw how the astrologers had tricked him he fell into a passion, and gave orders for the massacre of all children in Bethlehem and its neighborhood, of the age of two years or less, corresponding with the time he had ascertained from the astrologers. So the words spoken through Jeremiah the prophet were fulfilled: "A voice was heard in Rama, wailing and loud laments; it was Rachel weeping for her children, and refusing all consolation, because they were no more."**

This is the day after Christmas. And I am wondering if anyone here had a perfect Christmas Day? When I read this scripture from Matthew I realize that Christmas was not the perfect holiday for the Holy Family. There were serious issues with the first manger scene. The baby Jesus was delivered in a stable in the middle of the night. Joseph was warned in a dream to take the mother and child and flee to Egypt because Herod was out to get him. Who here would want to spend Christmas fleeing from a madman bent on infanticide?

Because it is Christmas we have the hope or idea that it is going to be a perfect day. It was not perfect on the first Christmas nor was it perfect in 2010. On this very Sunday, the return lines in department stores are already forming. People are there to exchange a Christmas present because it was a gift they did not want, it was a gift that did not fit, a gift that was the wrong color, or a gift they received several times over. Some people will take these presents and re-gift them next holiday to someone else

who does not want it, or does not fit, or is the wrong color. All of this suggests that Christmas Day was not perfect.

Gift returns are not the only sign that Christmas morning did not measure up. There are people who were very disappointed in the gifts they did not receive. Some of us were uncomfortable with all of the visiting in-laws and outlaws in our extended or blended families. We may be upset by those who did show up for Christmas dinner, and by those who did not show up. Some of us are exhausted by all of our time and effort trying to balance out how much time we spent with mothers and fathers, in-laws, the children of our spouses' ex-husband or wife. And what about the children who did not call on Christmas day but sent us a text message with a smiley face – Xmas.

The perfect Christmas dinner can also be spoiled by the food that was burned, or under-cooked, the dry turkey, and the dish that people forgot to bring, and so on. Some are less than pleased with the weight we gained. In my house, a Christmas morning without pecan waffles would not be Christmas. Some are downright angry with the uncle who had more Jack Daniels in his drink than egg-nogg.

This reminds me of a wonderful story that William Muehl wrote several years ago. Muehl was a professor at Yale University. He and his wife agreed to meet at the school auditorium for the Christmas pageant. The teacher announced that the manger scene would be presented by the Connecting Class.

“The houselights dimmed, the school janitor sneaked on stage with a box of straw, and a purple spot focused erratically about halfway between the pillars of the proscenium arch.

Then from the wings came three virgin Marys, who arranged themselves coyly around the crèche and waved to their relatives in the audience. A vague uneasiness came over me. I feared for a moment

that we were about to witness the promulgation of a new dogma – group childbirth. But my wife, who is somewhat more sophisticated than I am in such matters, pointed out that the school had, over the course of the years, acquired three costumes for the virgin Mary. So, by the strange logic which seems to govern pageants, there had to be three virgins.

The virgins were closely followed by two Josephs who took up sullen postures near the box of straw and stood their picking their noses.

Next came the angels, about twenty little girls dressed in diaphanous white gowns and sporting immense gauze wings. They deployed themselves with suspicious symmetry across the platform. Then the shepherds appeared, an equal number of small boys dressed in burlap sacks and clutching an assortment of saplings which purported to be crooks.

At this point an unfortunate discovery came to light. In order to be sure that the angels and shepherds would strike a pleasantly balanced array on stage, the drama coach had made a series of chalkmarks on the floor. A circle for each angel and a cross for each shepherd. She had urgently instructed the children that they were all to find and stand on appropriate symbols. But unwisely this marking had been done when the pupils were wearing their ordinary clothes, shorts, skirts, and overalls. When the angels came on in their flowing robes, each of them covered not only her own circle but the adjacent cross as well.

The shepherds, driven by God knows what demonic impulse to indiscreet obedience, began looking for their places. Angels were treated as they have never been treated before. And at last one little boy, who had suffered about all such nonsense that he could handle, turned toward the wings where the teacher in charge was going quietly mad and announced angrily, “These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They’ve hidden all the crosses!”

Dr. Muehl concluded his story with this remark, “Needless to say his mother and I were greatly embarrassed.”<sup>1</sup>

Anna Quindlen wrote, “The thing that is really hard, and really amazing, is giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself.” As a young Methodist child I remember being urged to “move on to perfection.” Perfection is a theme found in the letter to the Hebrews in the New Testament. A related idea is

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<sup>1</sup> William Muehl, *All the Damned Angels* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1972), pp, 12-13.

John Wesley's doctrine of sanctification. Sanctification always follows salvation. Sanctification means that even though we had found salvation in Christ, we need to continue to grow in our character and behavior. It is the transformation of our souls that purifies us so that we might be set aside for some divine purpose. As a child this was quite a daunting burden. Of course the earnest striving after perfection can only result in the acute awareness of how imperfect we really are or ever will be.

Even when we do the best we can we often come up short or wind up with consequences we never even imagined. I think about my Aunt Helen who crocheted a toilet seat cover for her mother's Christmas present. On Christmas Day Grandma Brown opened her present. She said, "Oh, how lovely," and promptly put it on her head. She wore her Christmas bonnet all day long. No one had the heart to tell her it was a toilet seat cover.

I am reminded of the Japanese worldview and aesthetic called *wabi-sabi*. *Wabi* is translated to mean humble, rustic simplicity, and quiet freshness. *Sabi* represents serene beauty as it ages. *Wabi-sabi* arts pose images that reflect the humble beauty of life that is transient and therefore impermanent. It recognizes that nothing is ever perfect and everything is prone to change. The constant flux and impermanence of life is seen in such Japanese arts as Ikebana, Zen gardens, Japanese poetry such as haiku, pottery such as Hagi ware, and the Japanese tea ceremony.

While each of these art forms is highly disciplined, the *wabi-sabi* artist will include one small flaw. Human elements will be greatly diminished. Despite years of training it is understood that the tea master will never execute the ceremony without flaw. The flaw could be found in the teacup or the way it is presented to the guest.

For the past year I have been attempting the art of *wabi-sabi* in my photography. For example, I have photo of a beautiful sunflower. If you look closely there is a fly that nearly blends in with the ripening sunflower seeds. My favorite *wabi-sabi* photo is of an old fence post covered in lichen. It is strung with rusty barbed wire. Weeds grow haphazardly through the wire.

I submit to you this morning that ours is a *wabi-sabi* God. St. John declared that, “God so loved the world.” He did not say that God loved the world conditionally. He did not say God loved the beautiful parts of the world, or the intelligent parts of the world, or the good parts of the world. The Christian gospel has declared that God loves the world unconditionally, in spite of ourselves – warts and all. Jesus is born into a country under Roman occupation whose parents are of limited means. Mary and Joseph had gone to Bethlehem to register for the census whose primary function was taxation. It is like being born on April 15<sup>th</sup>. The story tells us that Jesus was born in a stable and we read this morning that the family fled to Egypt to avoid the murder of the child. The story goes on to say that Herod ordered his troops to massacre all children under the age of two in Bethlehem and its neighborhoods. He was not going to have his power usurped by some Jewish brat.

God must have surely known the evil that lurked in Herod’s heart but determined to deliver God’s self into our imperfect world. And when the Bible says that, “the Word became flesh,” it can only mean our imperfect and fallible flesh. God assumes the transient life that is fundamentally flawed from cradle to grave. God assumes the human condition that is impermanent, ages, and is susceptible to disease, and death. And I hope you also hear that this *wabi-sabi* God and Savior retain a

humbleness of heart. Jesus surrounded himself with common folk and entered their lives of fishing, ill health, mother in laws, carpentry, common meals, mental illness, and the constant search for hope. He spoke of bread and fishes, lilies of the field and birds of the air, salt and light, banquets and brides, water and wine, divorce and fidelity.

When you see the depictions of Jesus throughout the ages he is seen as the center of focus. He stands brilliantly on a hill surrounded by the masses who are indistinguishable. He sits at the middle of the table at the Last Supper, with every face turned toward him. Jesus is found knocking at the door, slightly taller than the door itself. Or we see the crucified Christ, suffering cosmic death as he is raised up on the cross. Finally, recall the images of the risen Christ casting light unto utter darkness, sometimes seated at the throne of God the Father.

I wonder if we may have gotten it wrong, with all due respect to artists from Michelangelo to Salvador Dali. I wonder how a *wabi-sabi* artist would have rendered our *wabi-sabi* God and Messiah. I can imagine a painting of a small Jewish peasant, perhaps located in the lower left corner of the painting. He is moving through crowds of people whose needs nearly overwhelm him; whose pain is absorbed into every pore of his being. You can hardly distinguish him from all of the others. And there is blind Bartimaeus, and short little Zacchaeus, angry Peter, tax collectors and whores, women and babies all wanting something from him. The flow of the painting moves you from this humble preacher through the crowds toward a beautiful sunset on a far away hill. But as you look closely you see tiny dark figures. What are they? Could they be

black crows? Or crosses? I am not sure. But something isn't right. There is something troubling about the movement of this painting. It isn't perfect!

One day a young man was standing in the middle of the town proclaiming that he had the most beautiful heart in the whole valley.

A large crowd gathered and they all admired his heart for it was perfect. There was not a mark or a flaw in it. Yes, they all agreed it truly was the most beautiful heart they had ever seen. The young man was very proud and boasted more loudly about his beautiful heart.

Suddenly, an old man appeared at the front of the crowd and said, "Why your heart is not nearly as beautiful as mine." The crowd and the young man looked at the old man's heart. It was beating strongly, but full of scars, it had places where pieces had been removed and other pieces put in, but they didn't fit quite right and there were several jagged edges. In fact, in some places there were deep gouges where whole pieces were missing.

The people stared - "How can he say his heart is more beautiful?" they thought. The young man looked at the old man's heart and saw its state and laughed. "You must be joking," he said. "Compare your heart with mine, mine is perfect and yours is a mess of scars and tears."

"Yes," said the old man, "Yours is perfect looking but I would never trade with you. You see, every scar represents a person to whom I have given my love. I tear out a piece of my heart and give it to them, and often they give me a piece of their heart which fits into the empty place in my heart, but because the pieces aren't exact, I have some rough edges, which I cherish, because they remind me of the love we shared."

"Sometimes I have given pieces of my heart away, and the other person hasn't returned a piece of his heart to me. These are the empty gouges - giving love is taking a chance. Although these gouges are painful, they stay open, reminding me of the love I have for these people too, and I hope someday they may return and fill the space I have

waiting. So now do you see what true beauty is?"

The young man stood silently. Something was pulling at his own heart. He walked up to the old man, reached into his perfect young and beautiful heart, and ripped a piece out. He offered it to the old man with trembling hands. The old man took his offering, placed it in his heart and then took a piece from his old scarred heart and placed it in the wound in the young man's heart. It fit, but not perfectly, as there were some jagged edges.

The young man looked at his heart, not perfect anymore but more beautiful than ever, since love from the old man's heart flowed into his. They embraced and walked away side by side. (Author Unknown)<sup>2</sup>

Merry *Wabi-Sabi* Christmas to you and the ones you love.

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<sup>2</sup> Georgia Girl: Inspiring Short Stories, "The Most Beautiful Heart," <http://www.GAgirl.com/stories/themostbeautifulheart.html>, downloaded 12/25/10.