

When I was a good bit younger, I quickly realized that one of the advantages, I suppose, of being relatively young and new in ministry was that my more experienced colleagues view me as a repository for their collective wisdom culled through the years. It still happens, though less frequently as some of the tell-tale signs of aging are becoming more noticeable on my person. But when I was still young enough that my colleagues would regularly give me advice, I got a lot of it. The advice I received through the years has ranged from the truly absurd to the truly profound. How many ministers, for example, in the easy naiveté of early ministry, have been foolish enough to believe, that they, not the church secretary, are the resting place of the confidences of a congregation? How many ministers have arrogantly thought that the answer to stewardship was a stem-winding sermon rather than cultivating a feeling of trust and excitement in the church? There are decided perks being the recipient of hard-won wisdom, and so I generally would listen, discard about half, and take to heart the remainder. One conversation with a minister friend of mine stands out today, though.

“In the course of your ministry, if you are a lifer, you will preach some forty-odd sermons on Christmas Eve or Christmas day.” he said. “Under no circumstances should you ever deviate from the tried and true formula for Christmas success.”

My curiosity was piqued, so I said, “Go on...”

“The secret to Christmas success is ‘Whatever you do, don’t mess up Luke 2.’”

I must have looked amused, because he continued. “In the course of your ministry, you will no doubt get bored with Luke 2. There may be occasions when you consider messing with the formula. Resist the urge. There may be occasions when, world events,

congregational life, other circumstances, might suggest that you consider preaching from Matthew's Nativity Story. Don't do it. When it comes to Christmas, people come to services for one reason, maybe two if you include singing *Silent Night*. They come to hear Luke 2. They want their shepherds abiding in the fields by night, a multitude of heavenly hosts singing Glory to God and peace on Earth. They don't want Matthew's dark version with a murderous king or even John's theology. Save those for another Sunday. Preach Luke 2. You deviate from that at your own peril."

I read Luke 2.

In fact, if anything I read Luke 2 with great fear and trepidation about what I would say after it. How do you talk about the birth of salvation, the reconciliation of the world without fear and trepidation?

You see, I think we come to church at Christmas for more than Luke 2 and Silent Night and The First Nowell. Or maybe I'm wrong. Maybe we really do come just to hear Luke 2, but not for warm gooey feelings about shepherds and angels, but because we need at our most elemental level, even if it's only twice a year, to hear once more that Genesis 1 is possible. We need to know that Genesis 1 can happen again.

John knew that. Why do you think he starts his Gospel account off with the words *In the Beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God*? Why do you think he tells us that Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh is in whom the whole of creation abides? Because it's Genesis 1 again. Everything fresh and new and clean and without Sin.

John says it elegantly, but the apostle Paul said it even more plainly: if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation. See the old has passed away.” Genesis 1- because of Luke 2.

Is that what we have come again to hear? I hope so. I really hope so. I hope we come believing that new creation is possible. If not, Christmas is just pretty music and warm candlelight and Poinsettias and milk and cookies for an overweight man dressed in red. Ah, but if it's new creation we've come to find, well, then its not just pretty music, but our Choir joining its voice with the angels as we sing Glory to God and peace on Earth. If it's a new creation we've come to find, then the advent wreath isn't just a fire hazard but a candle testifying to the light that shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. And if it's a new creation we've come to find, then the world is before us filled with endless possibility.

So what will it be?

Luke 2 and Sunday brunch? Silent Night meets The Night Before Christmas? Santa Claus lighting the advent wreath, perhaps?

If that's all, well we haven't really lost anything. But we certainly haven't gained anything. If there's no Genesis 1 following Luke 2, well, you still heard the story, but it was just a story. It wasn't Gospel, it wasn't good news.

Let me tell you a story. Fred Craddock tells it better, since it's his, but it's just so apropos that I can't help but use it.

Talking about a friend of his, Craddock writes:

“My now deceased friend, Oswald Goulter, thirty years a missionary to China, was under house arrest for three years. He would be released by the communists if he promised to

go home. He wired back, the missionary society sent him money for transportation and he took a ship. He went down to India to catch a ship, and when he was in the coastal city in India before leaving, he heard that there were a lot of Jews sleeping in barn lofts in that city. They'd been denied entrance to every country in the world except that one, and they'd gone inland and were living in barn lofts. It was Christmas time. Oswald Goulter went around to those barns and said to the Jews, 'its Christmas. Merry Christmas.'

They said, 'we're Jews.'

He said, 'I know, but it's Christmas.'

They said, 'We don't observe Christmas, we're not followers of Christ, we're Jews.'

He said, 'I know, but what would you like for Christmas?'

'We don't keep Christmas.'

'I know, but what would you like? If somebody gave you something for Christmas, what would you like?'

They said, 'well, we'd like some good German pastry.'

'Good!' So he went looking, and he finally found some German pastry at some shop there in the city. After cashing his passage Check, he took boxes of German pastries to these Jews and said, 'Merry Christmas.'

Then he wired the missionary service and said, 'I need a ticket home.'

When that story was being told, there was a young seminarian in the front row, and he was absolutely incensed. He said to Dr. Goulter, 'Why did you do that? They don't believe in Jesus!' And Dr. Goulter said, 'But I do. I do.'"

And when Craddock told this story, he said that Goulter was a man straight out of Genesis 1. Cashing his check for passage so that he could share with those not of a same faith the blessings of Christmas. He just shared hospitality with strangers. Genesis 1. No, I don't think we came here just to hear Luke 2 once more today. I think we came because instinctively, we know there's something more. We came because we need to affirm once more that the birth of Jesus matters. Luke 2 matters, because it makes Genesis 1 possible all over again. We can be as we were created to be.

So we're not here today to hear that the stable might have been the warmest room available, or that Quirinius was governor of Syria so we can date the birth of Jesus to some time generally two thousand years ago...or that Jesus was probably born in the spring...or that Christmas trees have pagan roots...We've come to hear the simple unadorned Gospel, tidings of good news of great joy to all people, that born to us this night in the city of David is a savior, who is Christ the Lord."