Sermon for Christmas Eve

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Tuesday, December 24, 2018

Title: The work of a master

A few weeks ago, a member of this parish generously gave us a beautiful print of Da Vinci’s *The Last Supper*, purchased and framed just outside the Church in Milan where the real-live original can be found. Having seen the painting countless times in textbooks and movies, he was surprised by how moving – transformative, even - it was to see it in person. He struggled to find the words for precisely how and why it had so touched him, but went so far as to say he has not been quite the same since.

Completed in 1498, the mural deteriorated quickly, so much so that less than sixty years later a biographer of Da Vinci declared it “ruined.” A first restoration was undertaken in 1726 and another in 1770. Most of the attempted restorations in the 1800s actually did more harm than good, and it barely survived the Church’s bombing in the Second World War, when a creative structure built to protect it, largely secured by sandbags, somehow did.

It was not until 1978 that a major restoration, with the benefit of modern techniques and technologies, was undertaken. Under the direction of Pinin Barcilon, various teams were brought into to stabilize the painting, reverse the degradation caused by centuries of dirt and pollution, and amend the damage done by previous attempts at preservation. The project took twenty-one years and concluded in 1999, and when it did what visitors discovered in the now air-tight, carefully controlled environment looked rather different.

Whereas previous restorations had sought to augment colors and details, marring the mural with glossy greens and rosy reds, the recovered original is more muted, quiet, stark. It manages to be both less dynamic and more striking - beautiful in its simplicity - and highlights details hidden away for centuries, such as the pattern of a Jewish prayer shawl carefully woven into the tablecloth. As this parishioner observed, “the ephemeral and fragile nature of (the restored painting) made it somehow more powerful and spiritually grounding.” He emerged from the Church with “a deeper appreciation for Da Vinci’s attempt to buck convention by showing Angels, Mary, and Jesus as real people living their lives as opposed to other-worldly beings set apart from us,” a decision that led most of his contemporaries to consider his work “low-class.”
My guess is that when many of us think of the Christmas story, what comes to mind is a tableau no less striking and memorable than *The Last Supper*: some image of Jesus, Mary and Joseph in the manger, the shepherds and animals hovering protectively nearby, the angels circled around, while a bright star shines above them, and three elaborately adorned Kings aboard bejeweled camels stand to the side. This might actually be a recollection of a real-live painting: *The Nativity*, by Caravaggio, or Rembrandt’s *Adoration of the Shepherds*, perhaps. Or maybe it is a snapshot from a scene like the one that took place here just a few hours ago: a Christmas pageant, frozen in time somewhere in the recess of our memory. It is a beautiful, colorful, vibrant scene, aglow in the warmth and joy of this night. I have a scene like this. And I cherish it. But I wonder sometimes if this much beloved tableau doesn’t obscure a more nuanced, deep, radical original hidden just below the surface – more muted and stark, perhaps, but no less beautiful - somehow both maintained and veiled from us in our attempts at preservation, our attempts to tell and retell this cherished story over the millennia.

In most of our imaginations, the Holy Family is at peace, assured by God’s favor, radiant with a holy glow. But the way Luke tells it, the first Christmas was a bit of a blur. The whole thing begins with, of all things, a census. The occupying Roman forces want to register the people they oversee, probably as much to ensure they can tax them to the nines as to enact a show of force: Emperor August issues this decree, and Mary and Joseph, like everyone else in Nazareth, has little choice but to comply. You can imagine that if there were exemptions – say, for pregnant women - they would have qualified, but this foreign army and their foreign leader didn’t ask if it now was a good time.

So they walked, slowly, quite a distance to be registered in Bethlehem, and in what was surely a rather terrifying turn of events, Mary went into labor – far away her mother, from Elizabeth, her cousin, from the friends who knew her birth plan by heart. Remember that childbirth was then, as it is in much of the world today, a leading cause of death for women, even under the best of circumstances. And yes, there are angels at work, waking up the shepherds, rousing their sheep, but their frantic instance that no one needs to be afraid belies the fact that, well, everyone was kind of afraid. It was a pretty scary scene.

Imagine a tired young woman today, forced from her home by the tyranny of some faraway official, or the gangs down the street, made to walk for miles, or for days, as her belly swells and her husband swears, despairing of their plight. And when they get where they are
going, there’s no place in the refugee camp for them, no welcome mat, no room at the inn. But there is a shabby lean-to, an open Church basement, a shed. Its not much but its clean and dry. It’s probably not too hard to imagine this scene, really, because it is unfolding in countless places around the world right now. In June of this year, the United Nations estimated that almost 68.5 million people had been driven from their homes in 2017, with wars, violence, persecution, and natural disasters the leading causes of such displacements.¹ This is the highest that number has been since World War II. Now, granted, Mary, Joseph and Jesus would eventually be able to return to Nazareth, but first they would flee all the way to Egypt to avoid the wrath of King Herod who, feeling threatened by rumors of a “new king,” ordered a mass-murder of all the children under two in and around Bethlehem.

So this, incredibly, is what we find hidden under the centuries of Silent Night and designer crèches; Christmas trees and fruit cake; Little Drummer Boy and candy canes: a poor, frightened, tremendously vulnerable young family, whose lives were caught up in a time of tremendous political disruption; who nevertheless carried with them the word made flesh - God’s best, most profound gift entering the world in surely the most unlikely way, the most unpromising of beginnings. And it may seem, at first, a harsher, simpler, shoddier scene, the low-class work of a master. But if we sit with the strange, familiar characters long enough, something new comes into view.

George Szirtes (Sear-tesh) was born in Budapest, Hungary, in 1948. In 1956, when he was just eight years old, his country was gripped by Revolution, a nation-wide revolt against the Soviet-Union backed communist government. Szirtes’ parents, who had survived the concentration and labor camps of the Holocaust a few years before, made the difficult and dangerous decision to leave, emigrating to England when their son was just eight years old. After a few days in an army camp – there was no room at the inn for them, either - the family was moved to a boarding house on the coast for three months before the finally settled in London, where George was able to re-enter school. Gifted in the arts and particularly fond of language, he went on to become an award-winning poet and translator of Hungarian poetry into English.

In 2015, as the global refugee crises began to erupt in Hungary, Szirtes returned to Budapest, curious about the lives and livelihoods of those trying to leave – following in footsteps he and his family left some sixty years before. One day, as he visited a railway station and spoke

with refugees seeking a way out, his cell phone rang. It was his friend and renowned composer, Richard Causton, who had been charged with commissioning a new carol for King’s College’s service of Lessons and Carols later that year. Causton was looking for a Christmas text to set to music and found himself thinking it would be “perverse to be writing a piece about a child born in poverty, away from home and forced to flee with his parents, without in any way paying reference to the appalling refugee crisis that is unfolding” in our own time. He asked if his friend would be willing to compose an original piece for him, an invitation Szirtes gladly accepted, which is how “The Flight,” the poem we heard earlier in the service, came to be.

“We sleep then awaken, we rest on the way, our sleep might be troubled, but hope is our day.” And that, I think, is the simpler, subtler, more nuanced beauty hidden in plain sight tonight: that in the darkest of times, the hardest of moments, the most terrible circumstance, God chooses to reveal Godself to us. God chooses to be born in our midst. It is not simply a reminder that we are called to extend ourselves in care towards those who find themselves in the same perilous plight the Holy Family did - though we are, indeed, so called – but that in turning toward the darkest, harshest, most unsettling places around us and within us, we are turning toward God, too.

This recovered story says that our wars, our violence, our greed; our depression and anxiety, our addiction and dis-ease; our aging bodies and our tired minds; they have no power over God. They cannot stop this love, this tender shoot of hope from breaking in and taking root. God will not be deterred. God is not afraid of our darkness, and we need not be afraid either. It is precisely in the darkness that God’s light shines the brightest. It is precisely into the darkness that God promises to be born yet again.

Christmas is not only a momentary reprieve from a grizzly world, an island of calm in the chaos, but the beginning of entirely new world altogether. Once we see this for ourselves – really see it – we, like that parishioner standing before The Last Supper, we will never quite be the same, and neither will our world. God is not afraid of our darkness, and we need not be afraid either, For “here is our fire, this child is our spark.” Amen.

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2 For more information, visit: [https://interruptingthesilence.com/2016/01/01/the-flight-by-richard-causton-and-george-szirtes/](https://interruptingthesilence.com/2016/01/01/the-flight-by-richard-causton-and-george-szirtes/)