

Preparing for the Christ Child: Telling the Story

An exploration of how “story” is so much more expansive, rich and meaningful than a mere statement, and how we might use that understanding to bring the “baby Jesus” story more fully to life for everyone we tell. Special thanks to Godly Play and Rachel Held Evans, author of *Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water and Loving the Bible Again*.

A Felted Beginning

When our children were young, I saw a sewing pattern---maybe Butterick or McCall's---for making a simple nativity scene out of felt. I made three sets, one for my sister, one for my daughter, and one for the boys of my dear friend Elizabeth. Most figures were a simple cone shape, with a circular base, and stuffed with fabric scraps, and then decorated with yarn, thread, etc. They were meant to be touched and moved around. The “people” were delightful. The most vexing creature was the camel. No matter how many pipe cleaners I used, he simply went splay-legged in a heap.

Elizabeth and her family were doing a considerable amount of traveling and she agreed to let her young boys include an example of their most recently discovered fascinating animal in the nativity scene. The thinking went something along the lines of: “I think the animal is neat -- the animal would want to see baby Jesus – and baby Jesus would think the animal is neat!

By the time the boys were in their teens, the nativity scene included a horse, a crocodile, a toucan and about twenty other animals not native to Bethlehem. The wobbly felt camel had been outnumbered. Enthusiasm for God's creation and baby Jesus was clear and joyful. And the two boys had become part of the nativity story. This is an example of how stories become woven into the strands of our lives. They become personal, part of how we understand who we are.

What, A Story?

When author Rachel Held Evans suggests that an historical event is a story, she is not demeaning it. She is endowing the event with heightened and enlarged significance that travels beyond the specific moment and achieves a larger view that is independent of a particular location and calendar. The treasure of a story is that it offers a way to make a point, more largely: avoiding direct personal judgment; moving beyond the precision and limitation of facts; and stretching to embrace a larger perspective. Rachel wrote that “If the biggest story we can imagine is about God's loving and redemptive work in the world, then our lives will be shaped by that epic. If the biggest story we can imagine is something else,

like religious nationalism, or “follow your bliss” or “he who dies with the most toys wins”, then our lives will be shaped by those narratives instead.”

Rachel describes a conversation with the pediatrician Alan Greene. Small children constantly say, “what's that?” “what's that?”. Dr. Greene said that “After talking with thousands of children, I've decided that what they really mean is 'that's interesting to me. Let's talk about that together. Tell me more, please!' Rachel adds: “we grownups aren't so different. We scurry around the world, grabbing bits of theology here and pieces of philosophy there...as we point frantically at every question and every mystery that befalls us, asking what's that? what's that? We may wish for answers, but God rarely gives us answers. Instead, God gathers us up into soft familiar arms and says, 'let me tell you a story'.” There are many ways to tell a story and a story as important as the birth of Christ should be told in many ways!

Angels Everywhere!

And then there are the angels. Not a tutu in sight. Instead, they must be more than a little scary. The first utterance from those heavenly lips –to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds – is “Be not afraid!” Something extraordinary is happening – come, join in, and be not afraid!

Take your place in the story

Tell the story of the birth of baby Jesus and invite the members of your household to select their favorite character. And then work with that character.

...Young children might be invited to dress as that character for supper time. They may want to act out

the story with their own stuffed animals...

...Older children might be willing to consider a variation on the Godly Play questions:

what in the story is most important?

what in the story do you like best?

could anything be left out, and still have the story?

Encourage discussion. Some children might want to draw a picture.

(And in the spirit of Godly Play, there are no wrong answers, just insights. You might learn something interesting about what your child is cheered by or worried about.)

...For adults, is there a moment in the story that tugs at you? Could you jot down words that come to mind—maybe write a poem—write a prayer that describes that tug and its

possibilities? The nativity story was vivid and alive 2000 years ago, and still is today when we pause to consider the remarkable participants and the message of courage and hope.

It Lasts How Long?

One year a dear and well-intentioned family member decided to “upgrade” our nativity scene...and brought us a much nicer one, complete with swirling garments and touches of gold.

Handsome. But how to make the story real?

We put the stable on the mantle ledge in the living room, empty. Nothing had happened yet. The manger (a feed trough, remember) was filled with straw, and the cow seemed content.

Then Joseph arrives, bringing Mary who is riding a donkey. (This is not an easy thing to do if you are very pregnant.) Then baby Jesus is born. The stable is beginning to look confusing. But not everyone has come, yet.

The shepherds are in the fields with their flocks. Imagine: standing in the field with your flock of sheep, watching to protect against animal attacks and thieves, and suddenly the night sky is bright, and VOICES are saying “Be not afraid!” Really, in the middle of the night? And they say that there is good news, and you should go to Bethlehem to see. Because it is so strange that it must be real, you go. This takes a while, and to make the point in our house, the shepherd and a sheep or two are placed on the coffee table, headed toward the mantel ledge.

Meanwhile, “Mom, why is there a Wise Man in the kitchen window?”

Well, son, he is still on the journey. It is a long way from the East to Bethlehem.

Finally, everyone arrives, the Wise Men last (they have the farthest to travel and following a star can't be easy). The Wise Men, being polite international travelers, had stopped in the Capital to check in with King Herod. When he heard what they were doing, he said “come back and let me know where the Messiah is, so I can worship Him, too”. That sounded out of character for Herod, but on they went.

The Wise Men brought gifts for the baby Jesus. Nice touch, but a little ominous: gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold might represent wealth, frankincense luxury or importance, and myrrh is an embalming herb used for burying the dead. (On a more positive note, maybe you could arrange for the children in your household to receive a small gift when the Magi finally arrive at the stable with their gifts for baby Jesus...)

After much singing by those “be not afraid” angels, the shepherds return to sheep guarding duty in the hills, and the Wise Men decide that something important is happening and they skip a return visit to King Herod. They decide to take a different road to get back home.

Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus get a little rest, and then Joseph is wakened in a dream by MORE angels: Herod is angry and baby Jesus is in danger...leave! He persuades Mary to take the baby Jesus and get back up on the donkey, and Joseph and the donkey walk to Egypt, where King Herod has no power. The baby is safe. And the story is just beginning!

Quite a Story!

We are part of this story. It is the human story and the God story.

It is our story to embrace and re-tell over and over, brave bits, funny bits, odd bits, and profound love that shined so bright that both local shepherds and distant wise men saw signs that a huge change and hope had arrived in the world.

May you bring the story home to your family this season.

God bless you, and all this world.