**Big Love in Small Places**

A Christmas Sermon

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As a child, each year on Christmas Eve day, my family would attend a matinee performance of The Nutcracker Suite at the San Francisco Ballet. The moment of the ballet most impressed upon me as a child comes in the first act. Clara has fallen asleep in the drawing room, the clock strikes twelve, and all of a sudden the beautiful Christmas tree placed directly upstage center, begins to grow. Grow and grow it did, as if by magic, to more than three times its original size, as the music swelled. It grew to the point where the living room set could no longer contain the tree, and so the walls gave way and began to melt into the wings as the stage transformed to make it room. The furniture began to slink off stage until only the tree, in all its fullness was visible. Next, giant presents the size of the now-dissolved walls of the former living room entered the stage and took position beneath the now enlarged and swollen tree. And then, with one final swell of music, the lights on tree blinked on in brilliant force, and tree’s expansion was complete. It felt like magic.

It was only in my teenage years that I began to realize the effect this transformation had achieved. This elaborate sequence of massive tree expansion was actually serving to shrink our focus. By making the tree grow abnormally large, and bringing in presents the size of walls, the ballet’s creators had managed to do on stage the equivalent of what in film would have been a zoom effect. From the “wide angle” view of the downstairs in a Victorian mansion, in which the tree and its accoutrements were simply background setting to the “main action” of flirting party guests and squabbling children, now the frame of view was tightened into a small, overlooked area: the space beneath the tree’s lowest branches. This was necessary, because the action featured in the next part of the story, was no longer the drama of important people, but the drama of mice and toy soldiers no greater than two inches tall. However, achieving this re-focusing of our attention on the minute, required the creators to pull of a transformation of almost mythic proportions.

I often think of the Incarnation in the same way: a transformation of almost mythic proportions for the purposes of re-focusing our attention on something very small. At its core, Christmas is, of course, a celebration of something unfathomably large: the Coming of Christ. The force of love at the center of all that is in the universe, being made real to us, becoming flesh and blood, something we can hear, and see, and touch, to know that divine love is true. On this holy night in Bethlehem, the relationship between God and humanity is changed forever from one of alienation and distance, to one of empathy and nearness. From the experience of God as a loyal but somewhat absent authority figure -- to the experience of God as a vulnerable, helpless, and very present human child whose authority comes from the care he elicits and not the compliance he demands. It could hardly be a more cosmic shift in how God relates to humanity. Indeed, it is such a transformation in how to know God, that many of us still struggle to embrace its fullness.

And yet, despite its importance, this word made flesh, this incarnation of divine love, shows up in a small place: a feeding trough, in a ramshackle barn, within a minor city, in a largely unimportant corner of a vast empire. It’s not clear that God could have found a *smaller* place to be born on that night 2,000 years ago. And in doing so, in choosing to make a big entrance in a small way, God reminds us that what is most ordinary, contains within it, what is most extraordinary. At the manger, God draws our attention to seek out the holiness and blessedness in the people and places we might overlook -- because, like mice in the living room or toy soldiers under a tree, they are so ordinary. It’s just another pregnant teenager. It’s just another band of shepherds. It’s just another wandering couple trying to find shelter. In Mary and Joseph, God is born into just another family -- not even a family, yet -- an almost family, to remind us that there is no such thing as just another anything to God. Either then, or now.

It is in the most ordinary places of our lives, that God chooses to be born, to make love most real. And so our invitation at Christmas is to look for big love in small places, for divine grace in the mist of human chaos, for abiding hope even in the darkest spirals. Like the shepherds at the manger, we too are called to kneel before the small and ordinary and honor the holiness within it. To kneel at our ordinary altar, where simple bread and wine become the presence of Christ in our midst. To kneel on a silent night, where our single candle reminds us that our deepest hopes are holy, however fragile or fleeting they may be. To kneel before a child, and tie her shoelace or dry his tears, and remember that in caring for the vulnerable among us, we are caring for God.

The gift of the Incarnation, of Emmanuel, is the promise that all of our lives, no matter how small or how rough or how broken, are infused with the presence of Christ. But, of course, it is easy to forget that. It is easy to race through the small moments of our lives without realizing the holiness embedded therein. It is easy to look at another person, even a loved one, and fail to honor or respect the human vulnerability and tenderness that is there. It is easy to pass a stranger on the street or even in the next pew, and forget to silently kneel in your heart to the Word made Flesh in them. It is easy to look at ourselves and forget that the light of Christ shines alongside whatever chaos might consume us. Christmas is our time to remember.

I’ve always found it a bid odd that we decorate for Christmas by bringing a large tree into our homes. But the largeness of the tree and the “out of place-ness” of it in my living room, serves as a daily reminder that at Christmas, the cosmic transformation of God’s love into flesh, happens here too, in my small and ordinary home. And I get to play a part. When I return after work, the tree infuses the whole house with the scent of evergreen, which, like incense, reminds me that God’s presence infuses everything around me. It re-focuses my attention to the way that God’s love is being made real in my own home. It helps me not forget that what is happening in that room, in that home, in my life, is part of the Christmas story: the story of bringing hope and blessing and healing and peace into the world. And that through my care for others, and my tending to my own vulnerabilities, I am part of something much larger than myself, my family, or even my community. And so are you. We are part of the mystery of divine love, of God choosing to be made real in us, for our own sake and the sake of others. Every day…whether we remember or not. It’s happening.

Come Epiphany, our trees will be gone, and Christmastide too. But I’ll bet you’ll still be finding pine needles in the corners of the living room until at least August. Each time you pick one up, may it bring you back to the blessedness of this night: to the promise that no matter what, the largeness of God’s love will dwell in the smallness of your life, so that you, too, can be a light to the world. Amen.