



## *Christmas Eve 2009*

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Novelist Frederick Buechner was a boy living in Manhattan in the year of the great blizzard – 1947. Years later he wrote about it,

It began slowly, undramatically, like any other snow...Little by little the sidewalks started to whiten. After a while the streets began to fill and the roofs of parked cars were covered. You could no longer tell where the curb was, and even the hydrants disappeared....The plows could not keep up with it, and traffic moved more and more slowly as the drifts piled up. Businesses closed early and people walked home from work. All evening it continued falling and much of the night. By the next morning it was a different city. More striking than anything else about it was the silence. All traffic had stopped....Nothing on wheels moved. The only sounds to be heard were church bells and voices. You listened because you could not help yourself.

Christmas Eve is like that great snowfall. It stills the noise of our world and, at least for a moment, quiets our cluttered souls also. After weeks of the noise and rush of the season – parties, festivities, shopping, and all the rest – it's over. It's Christmas Eve. It's quiet and we're listening because we cannot help ourselves.

When we lived in suburban Minneapolis I had a Christmas Eve tradition. On the way home from the office in the afternoon, I stopped by Macy's at a mall near our house. I went to take in the last minute rush. My shopping was over. I was an observer. Every year it was the same. Outside, the parking lot was jammed. Inside, it was a madhouse, a frenetic frenzy of last minute shoppers and frazzled sales people. It appeared to me there was very little peace on earth, not much, if any, goodwill to all. If there was Joy to the World, it wasn't apparent.

A few hours later, I headed for church and an evening of Christmas Eve Candlelight services. It was a dramatic shift from the afternoon madhouse. The streets were nearly empty. The mall parking lot was deserted. The mall was dark but the lights were on in each house. People were home and ready for Christmas – at long last.

An eerie quiet settled over the busy, noisy world. At church the pews filled with worshippers. They sat in the mystery and wonder of candlelight, sang old, familiar carols, enjoyed a rich seasonal feast of choral music and listened to the old familiar story. More often than not, they were deeply moved by it all. Long cherished memories rose up and new memories were formed.

It's Christmas Eve and we join the entire church in the ancient tradition that moves us deeply. Every year, I'm very aware that on this night something is going on quite beyond my control. Christmas Eve itself, as usual, is doing its annual, powerful work in us.

Christmas Eve draws us back year after year. It doesn't matter that we've sung it all before and heard the old story many times. Christmas Eve does something unique, and it seldom fails to touch the deepest part of our souls.

Part of it is the beautiful quietness of Christmas Eve. No canned carols in here, no loud commercials either. The seasonal concerts featuring professional musicians are over. Office parties and community galas are behind us. It's peaceful and quiet here.

Here, in the peace and joy of Christmas Eve, something quite mysterious and deeply spiritual is going on. The power of Christmas Eve touches us where we live, stirs the deep places in our souls, even heals our wounded hearts. Christmas Eve works.

The Christmas Eve experience lies beyond language, although words like peace, joy, hope and most of all, love, are certainly a good starting point. Even the most cynical or skeptical of us longs for the kind of world described by Christmas Eve. Who doesn't long for a world covered with God's shalom? Who doesn't long for the peace, love, joy and hope of this night of nights?

Beneath and behind all that is Christmas Eve lies the astonishing, to some outrageous, claim that on the first Christmas Eve, God came to us in the baby in the manger.

The Christian faith proclaims that something quite divine happened that night. The word became flesh and took up residence among us, is the way St. John puts it. The church confesses with St. Paul that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself." That claim cannot be tested by ordinary means of verification. It lies beyond the power of reason. While historical, it cannot be proven by historical research. It lies beyond the scientific method. Yet, annually, the world stops to hear the old story one more time. And here we are listening – and hoping – and waiting.

Most of the time, it's difficult for us to listen to God's story. We have to sit still and listen intently to hear God's voice in the old story, and most of the time we're too busy and life is too complicated for serious listening.

But tonight is different. It's quiet here, a silent night, holy night. If we listen, we just might hear God in the carols, the lessons, and the quiet candlelight.

The famous essayist E. B. White wrote years ago that it becomes more difficult every year to hear the Christmas message through the noise and clatter of the world that surrounds us. We need some form of hearing aid to assist us. And, White continued, the miracle of Christmas is that, despite all the noise that surrounds it these days, finally the old story penetrates the noise and is heard in the heart. Christmas cannot be destroyed by modern malpractice.

The power of Christmas, White suggests, is its "essential simplicity." That simplicity makes the story everlasting and, in the end, triumphant over culture.

The story as Luke tells it is simple. It's a little more than 100 words in length and takes about one minute to read aloud. It has few details of the sort time has added to Christmas pageants and crèches. There's no innkeeper and no stable. There are no angels at the manger and no animals either. The angels and animals are out in the field with the shepherds. In Bethlehem, it's just a young couple, a manger and swaddling clothes, and, of course, a baby. It is the unexpected, unconventional way God began the salvation of the world.

Oh, Caesar Augustus, the Emperor of Rome, appears at the beginning of the story. Augustus was busy turning Rome from a city of wood to one of marble. He managed a far-flung empire and wielded more power than any human in his world. He signed his name to an edict and half a world away a young peasant couple, even though she was very pregnant, submitted to imperial authority and headed to Bethlehem to pay a special tax.

And King Herod, a local despot and friend of Caesar, will appear in the story shortly. He was busy building a magnificent temple in Jerusalem along with a dozen palaces and other glorious public buildings, while murdering anyone who threatened his royal power. In Herod's temple, priests scurried about managing their religion.

Meanwhile, off in a corner of the Empire out of sight and independent of contemporary human powers, God went to work in the world – in a rather unconventional manner. In a shed, in a manger, in a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, held in the arms of his teen-age mother who seems stunned by it all, God went to work in the world. And on this night, the world changed and history divided in two. Compelled by love beyond human comprehension, God comes to us in that child who grew up to embody God's shalom and who gives it to all who ask.

Christmas Eve marks the beginning of God's invasion of our world. Tonight, services around the world bear simple witness to God's unconventional ways and wisdom displayed that night long ago. It seems God's just not that impressed with human powers and systems. God is at work in the world and more often than not, working silently and behind the scenes.

This night bears the weight of eternity. It evokes in us the very things of which it speaks. The music, the lessons, the entire night speaks of and creates in us peace, joy, hope and love. Faith in the God of Christmas works – God offers peace, joy, hope, faith and love to all.

Christmas Eve is, however, much more than the Christmas Eve experience. When God comes to us in Jesus Christ, God offers more than this deep spiritual experience. God's goal is far larger than we might imagine. The promise of Christmas is that Christ is born in us when we open our lives to God. Faith, receiving Christ into our lives, plants seeds of peace, joy, hope and love that grow in us, changing us from what we are into women, men and children in the shape of – peace, joy, hope and love! Christmas received in faith does what it talks about.

And so the angels sing one more time, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace, good will to all." Can you hear them?

Amen