

FAMILY CHRISTMAS HOMILY, 2008

Forrest Church

Perhaps the most famous editorial ever written appeared in the New York Sun more than a century ago. It was written by a shoestring ancestor of mine, Frank Pharcellus Church. As an aside, notwithstanding this token of evidence to the contrary, the Church family lacks in imagination. In the naming of children, for instance. Those of you who have heard me allude to my father, grandfather, great-grandfather or son will remember that all the males in our family bear the first name Frank. Some of us are called by our middle name. This is usually Forrester but it sometimes is Pharcellus.

In response to the doubts of one of his young readers, Frank the editor wrote, "Yes Virginia, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love, and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. How dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginias. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence . . . The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished."

Since in some respects Santa Claus may be easier for Unitarians to believe in than Jesus, if I were to adapt my ancestor's editorial for today's homily I might call it, "Yes, Virginia, there is a Jesus," the baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Let's begin with the star. Just like Frank Pharcellus Church's Santa Claus, the Christmas star leads us not away from ordinary things but straight to the very heart of them. It points not to heaven but to earth, to a stableyard, to a newborn child. Here is the greatest wonder of all, a mystery without need for miracle, being itself miraculous.

So shake off your skeptical airs for a moment. You don't believe in the star? Well, think again. There are 100 billion stars in our galaxy and over 100 billion galaxies. In the universe each one of us has about 1,500 personal stars. The star to person ratio is 1,500 to one.

I have an idea. Let's pretend we don't have the faintest notion of what Christmas is all about. I can promise you, we will not be far from the mark. What an

extraordinary thing we have to look forward to. A star shines. Your star. One of your fifteen hundred stars. The heavens are filled with celestial music. And, what happens? It is really quite astounding. Not that a child is conceived by the holy ghost and born of a virgin, but that a child is born. Yes, he changed the world, but first comes the stunning fact that he was born in the first place.

A child is born to suffer and wonder, to do the best he or she can. A child is born to love and serve, to fail and recover. And of course, to forgive. A child is born to sing in the darkness and cry in the sunlight and say a million wishes. That's what Christmas reminds us to do: to wish on a star.

But there is something else worth pondering about this miracle. Not so much the moral, but the morals of the Christmas story. A child is born. He becomes a man. Without intending to, in a lifespan of some thirty years he transforms 2000 years of history. He is inadvertently responsible for everything done in his name, centuries of religious bigotry and persecution, and also quite personally responsible for billions of acts of mercy and love. The morals of the Christmas story have nothing to do with moralism, nothing to do with the self-righteousness and window-shattering that follows from people in glass houses throwing stones. The morals of the Christmas story are summed up in the teachings of the Christ child. Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself; love your enemies; judge not that you be not judged; forgive those who persecute you; empty yourself and be filled; give away your life and be found..

Jesus was not a Biblical literalist, by the way. He quotes the scriptures rarely, once on the cross, when he asks God why God has forsaken him. And during his lifetime he is despised for breaking religious laws, for not honoring the Sabbath, for neglecting the commandments that enforce purity.

Beyond that, when his disciples ask him how they can guarantee their place in heaven, Jesus says, in Matthew 25, when you die there is a quiz. Nothing about the sins our modern day moralists impose as litmus tests. Nothing about banning Gay marriage, by the way. No mention of abortion or a word about non-trinitarians being damned to hell. No, the questions are these: Did you house the homeless, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, heal the sick, and visit those in prison. Why? Because, like us and like him they are children of the one great miracle, our blood brothers and sisters, our kith and kin.

If you tap the gospel in search for it, the Christmas commandment turns out to be quite simple: Unwrap your hearts. Wish on your stars and love to a faretheewell. That's the Christmas message. Man. Woman. Child. Danger. Hope. Faith. Wonder. Sacrifice. Glory. Betrayal. Death. Immortal Love.

Even fear. Not unlike today, where the dawning of a new year, ominous with economic shadows, looms dark on the horizon, the Christmas story is riddled with fear. The shepherds are sore afraid. And with the birth comes the slaughter of the innocents. Yet the miracle is about hope. Hope in the face of fear. Hope in the face of despair.

The miracle is not that some people make a million dollars, or look spectacular, or write famous editorials. The miracle is that these same people live and breathe and fall in love, fail and recover, grieve and celebrate, die and are remembered for their love. The miracle is not that some people have wonderful things to say. The miracle is that any of us can speak and say I love you.

So go ahead. Wish on one of you fifteen hundred stars. I wish I may, I wish I might. You may. You might. You might even name a few of them. After all they are shining for you. They shone over your birth. They will shine for you again tonight and every night you live. You are not a star. None of us is. But you were born under a star. And it will shine tonight. Let it bless you. Please let it bless you. And then remember to bless your loved ones and neighbors. Make good on your star, take its light, make it your light, make it shine.

And as you do, you will remember that Yes, there is indeed a Jesus. There is also a Joseph and a Mary, even a surprising number of Virginias and the occasional Forrest and Pharcellus. In fact, there are so many stars that we can't even begin to count them. We can't even begin. All we can do is say a wish on one or two and then go out and love and serve to a faretheewell. After all, it's Christmas. If you are hunting for miracles, look no further. We should be absolutely starstruck by the wonder of it all.

Amen. Merry Christmas. And may God bless us, each and every one.