

Comfort

Advent 4 12/23/18

Matthew 1:18-25

Rev. Abigail Henderson

It was December 2001, a few months following 9/11. I was twenty years old, a junior in college outside of Boston. The whole country felt raw, wounded, on edge. I was making frequent trips home to New Hampshire because my godfather, Bill, had moved from Manhattan to live with my parents. Well, technically, he had moved to *die* with them. Over the summer, Bill had been diagnosed with a terrible and terminal form of throat and mouth cancer.

It's hard for me to convey Bill's essence to you. He was a unique creature. In retrospect, I feel like I'm describing a character in a Tom Wolfe novel. Scathingly funny; exceptionally smart; occasionally successful. A gossip who could tell outrageous stories about famous New York politicians and writers. Bill loved money and living and working in the right zip codes.

But Bill also loved my parents, who were not ostentatious people, and they loved him. They were the best of friends, and they took him in for his final days. In late August, they installed him in one of our guest rooms, set up hospice care, and began a process that we all thought would take weeks. In fact, it took months. No one thought that Bill see Halloween, let alone the Christmas season.

And Bill, bless him, refused to go gently into that good night. He was furious, embittered that fate had brought him to this place. This had not been his plan, to die at this time in this place in this way. It feels wrong to speak ill of the ill, but he was hard to be around; even the most experienced hospice nurses were wary of him. Sometimes, my late father could sit with him in the middle of the night and hold his hand, the silence saying more than words could. But generally, Bill's rage and depression created this powerful forcefield around him, through which none could pass.

Except one—our family cat.

That cat's name was Beulah. And she was an affectionate and generous tabby who loved kibble and people in equal measure.

Now, Bill openly hated animals, which according to the universal rules governing cats, made Beulah love him all the more. She would amble into his room—a room with a hospital bed and monitors and the distressing sounds and smells of illness—and jump up right next him, settling her plump body against his thin legs, holding him with her gaze.

And even Bill, who normally disdained this kind of attention, couldn't turn her away. He allowed her to be with him, to ground him with her soft, warm purrs.

It was a complete mystery how she could do this—station herself so confidently in this danger zone where life and death intermingled, where the air was heavy with human suffering.

When I think of Bill and Beulah, I see a sort of reverse nativity. The baby Jesus entered the world among animals; and there was Bill, leaving the world in the same sort of company.

There is an ancient medieval Latin text that is sung at the Christmas Mass. The English translation goes, "O great mystery and wondrous sacrament, that *beasts* should see the Lord born, lying in a manger."

This text is, all by itself, is a brief sermon on the Incarnation. Incarnation literally means "enfleshment"—God with meat on. O great mystery and wondrous sacrament, that animals—animals!—should witness God's own self taking on our frail humanity, so, in the words of English poet Miles Coverdale, "that our poor flesh and our poor blood may be clothed with everlasting good."

The presence of animals at Christ's birth is actually not part of the canonical gospels. Yet painters and poets have always inserted them, so that we cannot picture the nativity without ox, donkey, and sheep. Why? Maybe the animals remind us that there is nothing spotless and tidy about this birth. The child was born as we all are born, inelegantly, in the midst of uncertainty and pain and hope.

We heard the story today of how God asked Joseph, through an angel in a dream, to stand by Mary. To do this, Joseph had to risk public shame. He had to risk safety. He does it all for this promise to his ancestors, quoted by the angel: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us.'"

In the ancient Near East, prophetic dreams were taken very seriously. They were seen as a real and legitimate form of communication between gods and mortals, but they usually happened to priests or prophets or kings. That this prophetic dream is

happening to Joseph, humble Joseph, should catch our attention.

It's another clue about the God we worship, the God we follow in the person of Jesus. This God does not need trumpets and timpani, or cannons and fireworks, to herald an entrance. Don't get me wrong, such fanfare is great and fun and wonderful, but at the end of the day, it's not true incarnation.

Incarnation, in the language of our faith tradition, is when God chooses to enter the world in darkness, with only farm animals as witnesses. This is the strangeness of God, that the sacred and the profane should collide in such an ordinary way. And rather than pulling God down, the collision lifts all of us up.

When we think of those animals gazing at the Christ child in the stable, maybe they knew, in their animal way of knowing, that heaven and earth were converging. As Beulah reminded my family, seventeen years ago at another holy time, when Bill was dying, animals don't care about beauty or propriety or pride. They don't care about what's fair or dignified or deserved.

What do they care about? Comfort and warmth. Warmth and comfort. They seek it out, naturally. And they always seem to know when something important is happening, and they hold their gaze, unflinching, unembarrassed, unashamed.

I think animals are onto something. Something biblical. "Merry" is the word that we usually associate with Christmas, but maybe a better word would be *comfort*. Because merriment doesn't belong in every place. Where merriment cannot yet enter, there is comfort. Isaiah 40 begins, "Comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended."

What is this comfort that Isaiah speaks about? Let's not confuse it with being comfortable, which is temporary and convenient.

No, I think Isaiah's speaking about a much deeper comfort, a comfort that speaks to the ultimate meaning of our lives--the comfort that comes with knowing that things do not just happen to us in a vacuum, that our lives have meaning beyond the meaning we give them. It's a comfort that insists that something beyond ourselves, something more powerful than ourselves *is* holding us, keeping us, even when we can't always perceive it. And we can give that something a name; we call it God.

Isaiah is speaking of the comfort that comes with believing, in our bones, that no matter what happens in this life, we are always in God's safekeeping. We are in God's hands. God's hands are bigger than the problems of the world, stronger than

oppression and injustice, gentler and more merciful than any human action.

This is the season when the church proclaims God's word of comfort to all who will hear it. The word is a story about God's life among human life; it's about God's pathos--God's suffering love--for us; it's about "God-With-Us," God moving toward us to the extent even of taking on our mortal life, holding us closely by experiencing the pains and joys that we experience.

It's a curious route to joy, this redemption, because the comfort of God does not proceed in a straight line, from point A to point B: instead, it moves in mystery, in fits and starts, in bits and pieces.

But have faith: The Good News is most deeply felt and understood by those who most need it. If we trust that the days of Advent and Christmas are a holy time, then our brokenness is an entry point for the mystery of Emmanuel, God-With-Us.

Back to my godfather Bill; he eventually found his way out of this world, a few days after Christmas. He was buried in the historic Mt. Auburn Cemetery in Cambridge, Massachusetts--a very fine zip code, if I may say. I remember people saying to us that it was a shame he died during the holidays.

But I think the opposite is true. It is not a shame when tragedy strikes at Christmas time, nor when the news of our nation and our world is so grim, so confusing and chaotic, raw, wounded, on edge at this very time. The suffering around us and within us may feel out of synch with the mood that we think goes with Christmas, but it's not; in fact, if you are longing for a different world, if you are restless in heart or mind or body, if you *yearn* now more than ever for justice and mercy and peace and comfort, then Christmas is designed *for* you.

So. What time is this?

This is a time to hold our gaze like the animals.

This is a time to treat comfort as the most precious gift that we can give or receive, and to exchange it whenever we can.

This is a time to follow Joseph and hope against hope in the promise of Emmanuel.

This is a time to trust God with our lives, and our deaths, and everything in-between, no matter what it all looks like, no matter how messy it may be, because the God we worship lives in the thick of it, with us.

May you have a Comforting Christmas. Amen.