

Like many of you, I find that this Christmas story from the Gospel according to Luke never fails to move me, especially when it is read aloud, in a sacred service like this, or a family gathering in the living room, or a child reading it at the dinner table, with people quietly attentive. The story has a mysterious power; it captivates and silences us; and often, it also reminds me of Linus in the animated children's special, "A Charlie Brown Christmas."

I was interested to discover that "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was produced hurriedly, on a shoestring budget, and no one expected it to be a success when it was first aired on December 9, 1965. It didn't have a laugh track, which was a staple of animated films then, and it had such unconventional music, pacing, and tone, that the network and producers all knew it was going to be a disaster.

It was the opposite. "A Charlie Brown Christmas" received an Emmy Award and a Peabody Award. It was so successful that it launched a series of Peanuts specials, and it has been aired every year since its premier in 1965. It also inspired the creation of several other animated Christmas specials, like *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, *Frosty the Snowman*, and *Rudolf the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. But, as successful as these other specials were, none of them had the arresting power of the low-budget, Charlie Brown special.

And at the heart of the show, something happens that is hard to imagine today. Charlie Brown has brought back an embarrassingly scrawny sapling to serve as the Christmas tree in the neighborhood play he's directing, and his friends heap scorn on him, with Lucy leading the way. "Can't you do anything right? You've been dumb before, Charlie Brown, but this time you really did it." Then they all break into mocking, derisive laughter; even Snoopy throws his nose up into the air and holds his tummy laughing with everyone else, as they all walk away.

Only Linus is left with Charlie Brown, holding his blanket next to his cheek and sucking his thumb, and Charlie Brown confesses that he has really messed up this time, that he guesses he really doesn't know what Christmas means, and he cries out in despair, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?!"

And Linus, looking up at Charlie Brown, takes his thumb out of his mouth and says, "Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about." And then, in silence, he walks alone to the center of the stage, where he drops his security blanket, "Lights, please," he says. The house lights come down, except for one small spot on Linus, and he recites, in his little-boy voice, the same story we just heard here again tonight.

"And there were in the same country, shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them. And the glory of the Lord shone round about them..." It goes on for a while. It's a long passage. And it's straight from the King James Bible. ... It's hard to imagine a children's animated film today with a lengthy passage of

Scripture at its heart. And yet, these verses of Scripture captivate and silence the other children who had just been mocking Charlie Brown only a moment ago.

In the wake of Linus' recitation of the Bible passage, there's no room for the children's former anger or mocking derision. It's as if they have all left the over-crowded inn and entered the stable. It's as if they all sense that something tender and mysterious has come among them. Forgiveness. A Presence. It brings to mind the witness of all the great prophets and gurus from the world's enduring religious traditions – those who go off by themselves and come back with a message that captivates. It's what Jesus said right after his time alone in the wilderness, "The Kingdom of God is here among you now." "It is within you."

We misunderstand the Christmas story, if we think it is only about something that happened a long time ago.

Modern people make this mistake all the time. But even in the fourth century, St. Augustine famously said that it is ridiculous to think that a passage of the Bible has only one meaning. To the ancient and medieval mind, the Christmas story that so effectively silences us does so because it's not just about something that happened a long time ago, it's about something mysterious and true that is happening in our lives right now.

What we hear is that Something is trying to get our attention, an angel of the Lord, perhaps, something is breaking into our lives with good news, news that One we have neglected or failed to notice in the grind of our everyday lives is here, beckoning to be discovered.

A 74-year-old priest, Jim Finley, recalls attending church with his devout mother one day when he was three-years-old. They were sitting near the front of the church, he said, and although he was only 3, he could tell that it was Christmastime, because there were Christmas trees in the sanctuary and a crèche near the altar. His mother had given him her rosary to play with, to help him sit quietly, and he remembers holding the smooth, glass beads, when a baby somewhere in the church started to cry. And in wonder, he leaned up to his mother and whispered, "Mommy, is that the baby Jesus?" And she leaned down and whispered in his ear, "Yes, it is."

And Jim Finley says about that day, "I was only three-years-old then, and I believed her. But I am 74-years-old now, and I still believe her."

Christmas is about this most important truth of our life, that no matter who you are or what you believe or do not believe, there is a child-like purity of heart within you that is your true life. It is how God made you. It is a calming refuge to which we may continually return.

One summer during college, I worked as a bartender in a pub in London, England. It was my first time overseas, and it changed my life. I decided after that summer that I would either become a priest or a bartender. We all harbor questions about whether we made the right decision, don't we.

I was only 19 then, and occasionally, overseas for the first time, I got lonely. But every day on my way to work, I stopped at a little bakery in my neighborhood. I had discovered scones, which I loved. But I also discovered something else.

Every morning, it was the same scene. I'd push open the front door to the bakery, with the little bell on the doorknob announcing my presence, and the lady behind the counter would look up with a smile and say, "Good morning, Love!" Every day, she called me Love. It was like therapy for me. I imagine it was also a manifestation of Jesus' words, "You have to be born again;" and "Unless you become like a child, you will not see the Kingdom of Heaven." This lady at the bakery was like a midwife, rebirthing me, making me like a child again, in the best sense.

Even if I had been up very late the night before with the partying pub crowd, this lady's words called me back to something deep and true and calming in myself. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us," St. John writes, and this lady showed me that OUR words have a way of becoming flesh and dwelling among us. We can be midwives for each other, gently calling each other home to something true.

But then, I discovered, they call everybody "Love" over there.

And after the initial letdown, I decided this English custom was still a healing one, and it's one that speaks of the mystery of Christmas. That God is Love. That we are made in the image of this Love. Which means that this Love is the deepest truth about who we are.

And what this means is that the picture of Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger is simply the picture of our true life, hidden and waiting to be revealed. A simpler, truer, and more forgiving life that we can midwife in each other.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. *Our words* have a way of becoming flesh and dwelling among us, and Christmas reminds us that we should choose those words carefully, and speak them tenderly, because we are always midwifing something in each other.

When we hear the ancient Christmas story, it has a way of silencing us, just as it silenced the mocking laughter of the children in "A Charlie Brown Christmas." The Christmas story has a way of silencing us, because in fact, it tells us the deepest truth about who we are and how we can still choose to live.

In England, they call everyone "Love." Because everyone is. And maybe this is our greatest hope at Christmas, that by our words and deeds, we can be midwives for each other, so that little by little, speaking this simple truth to each other, about something beautiful, forgiven, and inviolable at the heart of every human being, that by reminding each other of these things, over time, we may help each other to become who we truly are.