

Once Upon a Midnight Clear

The Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
Christmas Eve, 2013

Once upon a midnight clear there were certain poor shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, and once upon that midnight clear there were three eastern kings or maybe just Zoroastrian astrologers tracking a celestial object through the night sky, and once upon that selfsame midnight clear there was a young couple traveling overland from Nazareth to Bethlehem to pay their taxes. When God saw that everyone was where they needed to be, God said, "Now," and the story began:

'Twas the night before Christmas when all through the little town of Bethlehem not a creature was sleeping in heavenly peace, not even a mouse, for a decree had gone out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered, which means taxed. This was the first registration, which means tax day, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to pay what they owed so, naturally, the little town of Bethlehem was packed. Super Bowl packed, with Caesar's minions roaming the streets to keep disgruntled taxpayers from stirring up trouble.

Over the river and through the woods, Joseph went to Bethlehem to pay what he owed and he brought Mary, his fiancée. She was pregnant. In those days passengers traveling in their ninth month of pregnancy did not *have to have* in their possession an obstetrician's certificate dated within 24 to 72 hours prior to departure in order to travel so it's good that all of this happened back then instead of now.

Having been very pregnant myself during the month of December, I have to guess that Mary, bouncing along on the back of her donkey, was not admiring the "beautiful sight" or feeling "happy that night walking in the winter wonderland" of the Judean foothills.

All of this took place before Obamacare, so that when the time came for Mary to be delivered she gave birth to her first born son in a barn with no epidural.

And with no doctor wearing a white coat. And with no nurse wearing white shoes. No It would not be a white Christmas for Mary that year. There would be no white anything in that stable by the time the whole messy business was accomplished.

With her first born son all wrapped up in Bloomingdales... sorry no, that would be swaddling clothes, Mary laid him in a manger. His eyes--how they twinkled! His dimples how merry! His cheeks were like roses, his nose like a cherry!

The little lord Jesus asleep on the hay was big news. Bigger than the Bethlehem bargain basement markdowns. Bigger than the Judea's Got Talent open mike night at the inn downtown.

Baby Jesus was the lead story, according to one newscaster who appeared to certain poor shepherds with a word from *their* Sponsor: "I bring you good tidings!", said the news caster, "of a one time only Christmas blowout. Around the clock savings for all people! For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior. Christ the Messiah. You will find him wrapped up like a baby should be and lying in a pile of hay. Rather unfortunate, don't you think?"

Then, to the shepherds' wondering eyes, did appear a multitude of the heavenly hosts [but no tiny reindeer.] "Glory to God. Glory to God!" they sang, straight from Handel's "Messiah," and "peace on earth."

Then the shepherds went with haste to Bethlehem and had themselves a merry little Christmas with the child and his mother mild. Then "dash away, dash away, dash away all," they returned to their fields, the shepherds did, glorifying God and rocking around the Christmas tree for all they had heard and seen.

And, lo, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem asking for the newborn King whose star they had seen in the night sky. They found the child with Mary his mother and they offered him gifts: three French hens, two turtle doves, gold, frankincense, myrrh and electronics.

Mary nodded. A boy with a drum appeared and sang a repetitive song. The ox and lamb kept time. And having been warned in a dream the wise men went home by another way, saying "God bless us everyone!" and "it's a wonderful life," and "wait til I tell Virginia."

Once upon a midnight clear something true happened that our Christmas traditions and sayings and stories point to but also obscure. A cabaret singer croons "Santa, Baby". A nutcracker comes to life in a beloved ballet. Snowmen talk. Reindeers fly. Misfit toys find children who will love them.

Somewhere in all of this a Story holds itself true to its Original Author.

Retailers have been pestering us to get ready for Christmas since September! (That's four months.) And our wallets will still be recovering from Christmas in April! But that doesn't stop us.

"He knows when you are sleeping, he knows when you're awake," we sing, "he" meaning Santa. But only God knows such things! Only God knows when we've been bad or good.

And, God knows, the only reason for "being good" is not so we'll get a lifetime's supply of good stuff from God in return but simply because we are grateful for the miracle that God began at Christmas and finished on Easter.

God-with-us is the Christmas part of the miracle. God-saving-us is the Easter part. Beautiful traditions have arisen around the miracle but so has a great deal of nonsense.

In all of the beauty and all of the nonsense *one Story holds true to its Original Author.* That story goes something like this:

Once upon a midnight clear God spoke a word and the word was love. The Word became flesh and they named the Word Jesus.

Once upon a midnight clear, a child was born for us. He grew to be a man in whom it is genuinely possible for us to know God. No heavenly stocking stuffer, God we learned is like Jesus! Born to love, born to save, born for us.

Once upon a midnight clear, the people who walked in darkness saw a great light. On that holy night a child was born who is called wonderful counselor, mighty god, everlasting father, prince of peace.

In him the mighty are toppled from their thrones and the meek inherit the earth. In him the hypocrites are outed and the outcasts are brought in.

In his story, love wins.

Let love win. Tonight. Tomorrow. Forever.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling