
At Christmas, God Occupies Us--There is No Rehearsal, and Everything is a Rehearsal!

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We all have our favorite Christmas Pageant story. A few hours ago, in this very church, hundreds of children gathered to re-enact the Christmas story, and many more hundreds of parents and friends looked on with tears and laughter and pride. As usual, it was crazy, chaotic, and beautiful.

There are four gospels in the New Testament, and, thus, four very different ways of telling the mystery of the birth of Jesus. But if you know church life at all, you know there is a fifth way of witnessing the birth of Jesus, a fifth gospel: the Christmas Pageant!

Children, it turns out, do a fine job of proclaiming mystery. They don't have to know exactly what the words mean. The Holy Spirit came upon Mary, and she conceived and bore a child. Do not be afraid. Shepherds walk in dressed in old bathrobes. Everybody wants to be a king with Christmas presents. And all the friendly beasts are with us. And then we all walk out singing "Joy to the World." The story works, and it hardly needs a rehearsal at all.

About a month ago, I saw a sad church bulletin, from a church with apparently very few children involved. "Notice," it said, "A small skit will be presented at the early service on Christmas Eve. Children are needed." How sad, I thought, that they even needed to ask, as if children were not already whining and pining to be in the pageant. But then the notice shocked me further: "Three Rehearsals Required."

Three rehearsals? What is the need for that? I know churches with great Christmas Pageants who have no rehearsals at all. In fact, they pride themselves on that fact, as well they should.

Well, I do remember one particular church which definitely needed a pageant rehearsal. They did not have many children in their congregation either, and so the pageant turned into a way for the adults to showcase their design and theatre skill. The organist was maybe the most clever and mischievous person of the bunch. Not only had he rigged the organ to evoke strange sounds at certain points in the pageant, but he rigged up a zip line. Yes, unbeknownst to none but the most observant parishioner, he had rigged up a cable running from the back balcony right above the middle aisle, and right down to the manger where the baby Jesus would lie.

"The time came for her to deliver her child," recited the young narrator; and, with that, a papier-mache Holy Spirit dove came flying down the cable from the back balcony, straight down to a spot somewhere between Mary and a manger. No

need trying to explain the mystery of the Virgin Birth to those youngsters! They got it.

Apart from the true extravaganzas, no rehearsals are required for the Christmas Pageant. For, how do you rehearse what to do when two shepherds start hitting each other with their crooks? How could we possibly rehearse for the moment when Susie does not like her angel costume and wants the one that Janey is wearing? How do you rehearse for the moment when King Melchior trips on the steps and spills frankincense all over the baby Jesus? How do you rehearse for disciplining the boys in the back who, when the lights are dim, are singing, "Silent Night, Holy Night, Shepherds quack, at the sight"?

For that matter, how could we possibly rehearse for what really happens when life begins, or when an unexpected pregnancy occurs? How do we rehearse for the night when we have no place to sleep in peace? How do we rehearse for the times in life when the inn has no room for us? How do we rehearse for those ugly things that occur after Christmas morning, for instance: Herod slaughtering the holy and innocent children of the land?

Most of us in life do not get a rehearsal. When the first time comes to really change the diaper, we don't get a rehearsal. On the first day the child comes home crying from school, we don't get a rehearsal. When our teenager misses his, or her, first curfew. When our new boss is upset with us for the first time.

When we ourselves are asked to give the speech, when we have to step up to the plate, ... we do not get a rehearsal. When our lover is sick, we do not have the luxury of a rehearsal. When our mother dies, we do not get to rehearse the event first.

When the time came for the child to be born ... there was no rehearsal.

We do not get a rehearsal; and yet, every time we invoke the Holy Spirit, every time we cry out to the divine for help, we are practicing. Every time we trudge on through disappointment, we are practicing. Every time we suffer loss, we are practicing.

There is no rehearsal. And yet, everything we do is a rehearsal. A rehearsal for the realization of love.

Our being present tonight, here in this church, in churches across the world tonight, in churches across the world every Sunday, is practice. It is rehearsing.

Because Jesus showed up one day, unannounced, in a forlorn and forgotten place, because Jesus showed up there - Jesus can show up anywhere. And Jesus does show up - unannounced and unrehearsed. Un-choreographed and un-vergered. Jesus does not wait for things to be perfect before he arrives; he shows up in the imperfect things.

In other words, Jesus shows up all the time. In that sickness of our child. In that death of our father. Even in that broken commitment, that divorce, in that lost election, that failed deal, that cracked contract.

"There is a crack, a crack, in everything," sings my old hero, Leonard Cohen:

"Ring the bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That's how the light gets in."

[from Leonard Cohen, "Anthem," and the album, *The Future*, 1992.]

There are lots of cracks in the world right now. There are cracks in our once reliable institutions and countries. This year, the Occupy Movement people seem to be finding those cracks; and their presence in our parks and streets is presenting some true moral dilemmas.

And at our churches. The presence of the Occupy movement at some of our churches is truly presenting a justice dilemma. For the Church really does exist to serve the poor and the disenfranchised. Our natural inclination is for the outcast; our call is to lift up the lowly and to fill the hungry with good things. What happens, then, when our churches, too, are

vulnerable to the charge of serving the system instead of serving the poor? Yes, it is true that we occupy several things. We occupy both a position of wealth and resources and a humble history of serving the poor. What happens when our churches become the tension point, and maybe the cracking point, between social justice and social order?

Maybe love happens. This Christmas, we remember that we are all vulnerable. We are vulnerable to the charges of expediency and imperfection. We crack and sometimes break. Like an ordinary Christmas Pageant, we are both cracked and beautiful.

Yes, we Christians occupy several tensions. But we Christians are ourselves also occupied. And our occupation is the salvation of the world tonight.

The original Occupier is the God who came un-invited, and barely announced, into humanity over two thousand years ago. The original Occupier came into the world not with violence or fanfare, but in humility and surrender.

Imagine what God gives up in order to enter the reality of humanity. It is a surrender, even a sacrifice, so that the world might be saved, so that the world might learn love. Christmas is about God lowering himself to occupy humanity itself; and it is a descent which saves the world.

Tonight, we remember that God has honored humanity by occupying us, by becoming one of us, and so, person by person, becoming love in the world.

With God in us, Emmanuel, we have the choice tonight of who we will occupy. With whom will we be in relationship? What structures and organizations will we choose, and within which we can change the world? For we all must occupy something; we all serve from particular relationships, particular structures, even particular corporations.

We don't get to rehearse which relationships and structures work best. Even God did not get to rehearse. God simply chose. And God chose humanity. God chose us. It is up to us, now, to keep the Christmas Pageant going, to continue the drama of love being born into the world. Our lives are the drama. We are the Christmas Pageant that has no rehearsal.

There are not just four ways, or five ways, of proclaiming the mystery of the birth of Jesus. There are millions of ways. You! You and I, are occupied by the love of God tonight. Rehearse! Practice, and that love grows a million times into the world around us. Joy to the world! The Lord is come!

AMEN.

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