

“A More Familiar Christmas”  
Luke 2:1-20  
Christmas Eve

December 24, 2021  
Westminster, Greenville  
Ben Dorr

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I’d like to invite you this afternoon/evening to think about the familiar and the unfamiliar...

Once upon a time, a man went to visit a monastery.  
After dinner the abbot invited him  
to join the monks for an hour of social time  
before concluding the day with the late-night prayers.

The abbot said to the visitor,  
*“We often tell each other some jokes. Listen.”*

The visitor took a seat and listened to the monks.  
One monk said “74” and the whole company chuckled and chortled.  
Another monk said, “37,” and again the rest giggled and smiled.

“What’s happening?” said the visitor.  
“We all know each other so well,” the abbot replied, “that we’ve heard all the jokes, so we can just say the number of the joke, and everyone recalls it. Would you like to tell one?”

The visitor was nervous, but he thought he should try.  
*“165” he said.*

All the monks fell off their chairs with laughter.  
**“What did I do?”** the visitor wondered.  
“Ah,” said the abbot, radiant with happiness.  
**“We’ve never heard that one before.”<sup>1</sup>**

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<sup>1</sup> From a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Wells, “The Good Treasure,” preached in Duke Chapel, October 3, 2010. I am indebted to the Rev. Mark Ramsey for the reference to this story.

Do you know what it's like to be among the familiar?  
To have traditions and rituals that are like an instinct to you?  
To be surrounded by people you know, and they know you,  
perhaps better than anyone else in the world?

It's what Christmas Eve is all about.  
The familiar.

A familiar story from Luke  
about the holy family traveling to Bethlehem,  
familiar carols that we can sing by heart,  
candlelight with "Silent Night" before the service is done...

When the occasion is Christmas, we want to experience the  
familiar.

But not just at Christmas.

The familiar becomes particularly important when we become  
disoriented in life, when the world fails to look like the way we expected  
the world to look.

In the spring of 1992, when the city of Sarajevo was under siege by  
the Serbian army, the army began pounding the city with shells,  
reducing a beautiful urban landscape to a wasteland.

The people of Sarajevo sheltered inside just to survive. They  
ventured out only to get food and water, which itself was a risky  
undertaking.

On one occasion,  
a mortar shell hit a line of people waiting for bread at a bakery—  
and 22 people were killed.

At that time, Vedran Smailovic was a cellist with the Sarajevo opera, and the next day he dressed in his formal best, and walked to the crater made by the explosion, and he began to play his cello—Albinoni’s Adagio in G minor.

When he was done, he went back home.  
And the next day, he returned to the crater.  
And he played again.

He played the same beautiful music in that crater for 22 days, one day for each person who died in the explosion. He did it with mortar fire soaring over him and sniper bullets whizzing by him.

It wasn’t just a moving and incredibly courageous tribute to those who had perished. It was, as one writer put it, “an anchor amid the chaos...”<sup>2</sup>

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He was doing that which was familiar.  
How important is the familiar to you?

I suspect that it’s very important to us, especially at Christmas, but the irony is that the story we heard from Luke this evening is NOT a story about God doing something that everyone had already experienced before.

When an angel of the Lord appears to the shepherds, do the shepherds say: “Oh, hey, good to see you again!”??

NO...they were terrified, Luke tells us.

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<sup>2</sup> John F. Burns, “The Death of a City: Elegy for Sarajevo—A Special Report.; A People Under Artillery Fire Manage to Retain Humanity,” *The New York Times*, June 8, 1992. I am indebted to a sermon by the Rev. Dr. Scott Black Johnston, “Those Who Dream...Are Alert,” preached at Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, New York, NY, on November 28, 2021, for calling my attention to this story.

The story of Christmas is about God doing something NEW:  
“...to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

The story of Christmas is about God doing that which was UNFAMILIAR, something no one had ever seen before.

God incarnate.

God in human form.

God entering our world as a vulnerable, helpless child.

I'd like you to think this evening about the familiar and the unfamiliar...and I'd like you to consider whether there's a way to bridge that gap.

Do you see the gap?

Christmas, for us, is about the familiar.

We need it, we crave it, we want God to come to us in ways we already know.

But in the Gospel, Christmas is about God doing something new, entering the world in a strange and surprising way.

I heard a story once about some THIEVES who tried to bridge that gap.

John and Joan Leising were quite upset when somebody stole the plastic infant Jesus statue from the lighted manger set outside their home in Buffalo, NY.

The Leisings had always taken pride in their annual Christmas decorations. Year after year, they displayed a brightly lit outdoor

manger set—but on Dec. 23, 2005, they looked outside and realized the baby Jesus statue...*was missing from the manger.*

In the statue's place, someone had left a note, saying they needed the statue and would return it in three days. But weeks passed, and then months, and the statue was NOT returned.

Joan Leising started wondering if she might be able to find another similar statue at a garage sale.

But then, one morning in late August, John Leising opened his door and found the statue lying on his doorstep. There was also a note...and a photo album.

The photo album was full of snapshots of their plastic Jesus taken at various locations all over the state of New York.

Someone had posed the statue in front of signs in Binghamton, Rochester, Albany...

The statue was photographed at the Rip Van Winkle Bridge and at a psychiatric center...

*"Please read this letter in its entirety before passing judgment..."*  
the note began.

*"We simply wanted to show the baby Jesus a better life than he would have seen cooped up in an attic crawl space.*

*"He has traveled over counties and states,  
met people and animals alike.*

*"During the course of the last eight months, the baby Jesus has become more to us than simply a plastic religious figurine. He has come*

*with us to parties, on camping trips, on college visits and on multiple summer adventures...”*

*“The baby Jesus has made us happy at numerous times in the past eight months...Having to say goodbye made...a sad day for all of us.”<sup>3</sup>*

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Now don't misunderstand—I'm not advocating vandalism and stealing on this Christmas Eve.

But I wonder what would happen if you and I took Jesus with us on our journeys in the coming year...I don't mean taking PLASTIC Jesus.

I mean taking the risen Jesus.

I mean taking the light of Christ and the grace of Jesus and the love of God made known in Christ's birth...take it with you.

Take it with you into the familiar places.  
The traditions, the family gatherings, the daily routines.

And take it with you into the UNFAMILIAR places.  
All of us get called by God to go to unfamiliar places at different times in our lives.

Those moments of transition, when you find yourself...  
without a loved one for the first time in 50 years,  
or navigating a new reality called retirement,  
or living in in a marriage that's very different now that  
your children are out of the house,

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<sup>3</sup> Dan Herbeck, “Baby Jesus returns after road trip Family's decoration back after 8 months,” in the Buffalo News, December 19, 2006.

or newly divorced, and you're all alone in your house.

You don't need a Jesus statue to know the grace and love of Christ when you encounter unfamiliar territory in your life.

The good news of Christmas is that God bridges the gap...between the known and the unknown, the familiar and the unfamiliar—in the birth of Christ, God bridges the gap, and you just might discover that even though you thought you were bringing the risen Christ with you this coming year—it was Jesus who was bringing you, carrying you...

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Ted Wardlaw announced last month that he will soon be retiring as the President of Austin Seminary. Ted tells one of the most helpful stories I've ever heard about the familiar and the unfamiliar.

It's a story about one of his daughters.

When his two daughters were young girls, he and his wife wanted to raise them in the Christian faith, and one of his habits was to periodically put his hand on their foreheads, and make the sign of the cross, and say, "Remember your baptism."

Getting his girls ready for school in the morning?  
Shoes on, hair combed, backpack ready.  
Sign of the cross, remember your baptism.

Tucking them into bed at night?  
Brush teeth, read books.  
Sign of the cross, remember your baptism.

Now as they got older, he didn't do this quite so much...he didn't want them to get so sick of it that they rebelled against it. But he still said it to them. In fact, he said it enough that when one of his daughters

was in high school, she gently reminded him of how often she had heard those words.

She's heading out the door with her friends.

Ted says, "Do you have your driver's license?"

"Yes, dad."

"Do you have money for the movie?"

"Yes, dad."

"Do you have..."

And she cuts him off.

"Dad, I've got my license, I've got money, I've done my homework, I've walked the dog, I know what time to be home, **and I'm remembering my baptism**...I'll be ok!"

Well, you know how time gets away from us.

And the day came when it was time for this daughter to be sent off to college. So Ted describes the moment that he and his wife were dropping her off at her new school, all those miles away from home.

His daughter gives her parents one last hug, and then she leaves with some other college freshman to go off to another building, around a corner and begin a new stage in her life.

He's standing there, fighting the tears, saying goodbye.

And then, just before Ted and his wife leave, their daughter—she's maybe 30 yards away—she knows her parents will worry about her, that it's not easy for them, so she turns around.

And she looks at her parents, and she goes like this:

<Sign of the cross>

Now I suspect that all took place on a late August or early September day, just an ordinary day.

But I also suspect that for the Wardlaw family, it was no ordinary day.<sup>4</sup>

It was a day when Christ was born anew.

The good news tonight is that the same is true for all of you.  
No matter where you find yourself tonight—  
in a strange and unfamiliar place,  
or on a road you've traveled plenty of times before—  
remember...

Remember the promise of Christmas:  
Emmanuel. God with us.  
This very night, Jesus Christ is born for you.

Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> I first heard this story from the Rev. Dr. Ted Wardlaw when he led an adult education hour at Northridge Presbyterian Church, Dallas, TX, in April, 2013.