

December 19, 2006



Dear Friends,

One of the ministers over in Kitchener went with a group from his church to see *The Nativity Story*, the new movie that's out this Christmas about the birth of Christ. It is a respectful retelling of the story, which faithfully follows the Biblical account, yet his comment was that it had made him see some things in the story he had not seen before. I was curious whether the film would do that for me. As a minister, even as one with not too many Christmas sermons behind her, it is not always easy to find a new angle on Christmas. The story is too well known – almost cliché. Preachers have been plumbing its depths for over 2000 years now, and the need to preach at multiple services per season quickly exhausts the fund of fresh ideas. It is unlikely that people attending Christmas services this year will hear anything that has not been proclaimed before.

Actually, that's what reviewers complained about when they reviewed *The Nativity Story* for the papers. Given the commercial success of the *Da Vinci Code* this past Spring, *The Nativity Story* would probably have done better had it suggested an "alternative account" of the events – Mary impregnated by a Roman soldier, the wise men from the East, knights of some dying oriental cult, planting an encrypted seed of their religion in the gifts given to the child destined to become leader of Rome's spiritual empire, and thus transmitting it to the West (move over Dan Brown – I could make a fortune writing this stuff!). Instead *The Nativity Story* took the virgin birth seriously and portrayed the wise men as seekers with no other agenda than to witness and adore the one born king of the Jews. For its authenticity, reviewers branded *The Nativity Story* as "about as exciting as an afternoon nap."

The kind of drama, the kind of novelty, the kind of fast-paced action which movie reviewers crave, may not be present in the nativity story. We should not be surprised if *Happy Feet* with its all-singing, all-dancing, animated cast or *Deck the Halls* with its comic action sequences, complete with sleigh, reindeer and elves, make a bigger splash at the box office this season. But God is not into "splash," and God-seekers should not be distracted by the desire for something novel. That is what our modern commercial Christmases teach us – that unless a toy is the newest thing, it is no good. Who wants last year's Barbie for Christmas 2006? The nativity story is as old as the hills, but it's as alive as the God who inhabits it. It's not the story which is new, but the hearing. It's the hearing and the awesome truth of this story, by which God renews his people and their faith in Him, year after year.

My own experience of the film was that, like my colleague in Kitchener, I did hear something new, or rather, I did *hear anew*. I found the film incredibly moving. I had tears rolling down my face within the first five minutes, and for the next hour and a half they just kept coming! This didn't mean that I was unaware of how the cinematic storytellers had "crafted" the story – just as when I study a text with a view to preaching it, I become aware of how Matthew or Luke has "crafted" the material. Some decisions made by the movie's director I thought were ill-judged (like having the angel Gabriel appear in a linen tunic – angels ought to be either feathered or bare-fleshed – I found the weave of Gabriel's linen distracting, but then, I always complain about the angels!). Other directorial instincts were spot-on (like having the pregnant Mary, returning from her visit with cousin Elizabeth, shiver as she passes by a couple of crucified men by the roadside).

One very interesting decision was to choose the story of God's self-revelation to the prophet Elijah as he hid in a cave, from I Kings 19, to represent the faith of Mary and her community. Twice the film shows the story being told by adults to children of how, as the prophet hid, God passed by: "but God was not in the earthquake, and God was not in the wind, and God was not in the fire; but in the 'still, small voice.'" That passage is not one of the ones usually aligned with the Christmas story – much more common to hear one of the messianic prophecies from Isaiah or Jeremiah, Micah or Malachi, yet it was the perfect choice to underline the film's central theme – or at least the theme which struck *me* with renewed force, as I watched it. That's the thing which I was newly enabled to hear, if I had to pin it down – how very common-place this birth was. While kingdoms were being negotiated by power-brokers

like Herod, while soldiers and tax-collectors were thundering through the countryside on Roman war-horses, while the wise men were setting off with their camel-train of accessories – expensive wardrobe changes, a library full of parchments, a laboratory full of implements for star-gazing, and Balthazar’s essential dates – here was this peasant couple – absolute nobodys – doing what so many young couples across the land were doing – expecting a child. So where was God in this scene? *Not* in the earthquake (the thundering of Roman hoofbeats), *not* in the wind (the desert sandstorms with which the wise-men contended), *not* in the fire (Herod’s hearth hissing with drippings from the finest roast meat). While all this lavish distraction was moving around the story’s periphery, the real story was at the still, small center, with that young couple, expecting a child. That is where God was.

At Christmas time there is a lot to distract us. If not earthquake, wind and fire, then at least the thunderous trampling of Christmas shoppers, the searing lights and the mountainous terrain of rich food and presents. Where is God in it all? God is at its still, small center. How will you find that this Christmas? I hope to find it at our services, (the candlelight family service at 7pm Christmas Eve, and the 10.30am Christmas Day communion service, which I expect to be even stiller and smaller). I hope to find it in the space I make for quiet conversation with lonely people. I hope to find it in the stillness of Bible reading and prayer, and in going about my commonplace, everyday activities, made Holy because I do them in a world to which God came down at Christmas. Like *The Nativity Story*, these moments might be all too easily consigned to obscurity, by those without an ear to hear.

This Advent we have been thinking about Sabbath, a concept which is about rest, stillness and re-centring around God. Although these verses are not from a hymn traditionally associated with Christmas, let me share them with you as my Christmas prayer for all of us:

O Sabbath rest by Galilee, O calm of hills above,  
where Jesus knelt to share with thee, the silence of eternity  
Interpreted by love – interpreted by love.

Breathe through the heats of our desire, thy coolness and thy balm.  
Let sense be dumb; let flesh retire. Speak through the earthquake, wind and fire  
O still, small voice of calm – O still, small voice of calm.

*With blessings to  
you and yours  
this Christmas.  
Karla*

