

The Fairy Tale Is True

Text: Luke 2:7; Revelation 12:5

Richard A. Rhem
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Transcription of the spoken sermon

Children love fairy tales.

I remember a fairy tale feast when I was a child of preschool age. I was ill with scarlet fever. The family was moved out into the garage, the house put under quarantine. But, of course, my mother couldn't leave me. The shades were pulled and I was kept in bed. There was nothing to do but read to me - the same stories over and over, Jack and the Beanstalk, The Gingerbread Man, Goldilocks and the Three Bears. Mother read until she was tired of it. On occasion she turned two pages at once, hoping to abbreviate her task, but I always caught her at it; I knew the stories by heart.

But it made no difference; each time it was like a first time adventure.

This Christmas the family gathered to watch a video produced by David with all the children as his research assistants - 25 years of this family growing up and then each with their own families. There were several photos of me holding one of the grandchildren on my lap - reading to them. That was usually a Sunday after dinner pleasure, although I remember well getting very sleepy after a big dinner and wanting very much to get to a serious nap when the little one would say "Read it one more time, Bumpa."

Why do you suppose children love fairy tales so much? Of course, they are great stories, but I think there is something more -

They turn out right; just as they begin with the classic phrase, "Once upon a time ..." so they end with, "... and they lived happily ever after." When you think about some of the most familiar fairy tales, they are not all sweetness and light - there is high adventure, danger, darkness and evil woven into the plot. A good fairy tale has moments of high tension; they can be scary which is part of their attraction. But, in the end, good prevails, right emerges on top and nobility and truth are vindicated.

In that sense, the fairy tale is reflective of a whole philosophy of life and reality and, in turn, it is a teaching tool for the shaping of one's perspective on life.

Stories not only entertain, they form a philosophy of life. And the classic fairy tale reflects the conviction that the good and true will triumph in the end.

Later on when the child develops the capacity for abstract thinking, one can discuss values, right and wrong, truth and falsehood and their implications, but a sense of ultimate value has already been richly laid in the child's being by the tapestry of stories heard and lived.

I was thinking about this because of a few conversations I've had with some of you who have wondered how to receive the Christmas story - a story that begins, "And it came to pass ...", and is laced with angelic announcements accompanied by a heavenly choir, Magi from the East following a brilliant star that comes to rest over a stable wherein lies a newborn child born to a virgin.

Although scholarly research has investigated the whole of the biblical tradition for two hundred years, that research has only somewhat recently seeped into the church. But in our day, such research makes the feature articles of popular news magazines at Christmas and Easter, at least. So, how does one deal with the growing recognition that the Gospels are storied accounts of something that happened in the past?

The question is not so simple. For one thing, we are dealing with something that happened; we are dealing with the story of an actual birth event, not of a make-believe character, but of one whose historical existence is almost universally acknowledged. On the other hand, the story is a story laced with the supernatural - angels and stars and kings and a miraculous conception - aspects one finds surrounding the birth of other ancient heroic figures. Consequently, the stories have been scrutinized intensively in an attempt to ascertain facts from fantasy.

I suspect this is inevitable. We make a faith claim that is entangled with concrete historical reality - the word became flesh and dwelt among us. There is no way that claim will not be tested.

Nonetheless, such scholarly scrutiny of the historical event is the ruination of the story because the truth of the story is not in the narrative details, but in the meaning of the story - that which is "coming to pass" in the event - which is that God visits God's people to rescue them from darkness and death and secure them in light and life.

The story is the vehicle of the truth about reality, about the nature of things, about the meaning and end of life.

Do you remember our Advent question - How can we who are top dogs sing the songs of liberation of underdogs? Well, I am not going to repeat that, only to say once again that the songs Luke includes in the birth story are songs of liberation sung by people who have borne the heavy load of oppression and domination and

they celebrate God's visitation in this child through whom God will reverse the fortunes of the oppressed and their oppressors.

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Those dwelling in the shadow of death have had the sun of righteousness dawn upon them with healing in his wings.

I stressed during Advent the very concrete nature of the salvation referred to - its social, political and economic dimension - This was good news of a different kind of world for the poor and the marginalized. But now let me suggest that there is another dimension spoken to, as well - the anxiety of being human. It is not easy to be human and that is universally true for rich and poor, powerful and powerless.

We are all afraid, insecure - We are subject to disaster, catastrophe, disease - and we die and those we love die. Human existence is precarious, perilous, awesome, wonderful, and fragile. Not only in our individual experience, but also globally. The holocaust happened in the lifetime of many of us. Tyrants like Saddam Hussein hold our world hostage.

In the ancient world of the birth story of Jesus, it was taken for granted that there were powers behind the actors on history's stage, Herod and Caesar and Pilate - that the struggles on earth were reflective of cosmic conflict between the God of light and life and the Prince of Darkness.

As you know, that time was an age of the expectation of the end of the age and the literature that pointed to the end was called apocalyptic - a word meaning "unveiling."

The curtain was drawn back and one was given a glimpse of the transcendent world - the behind-the-scenes view of the powers of evil at work in the present - and the sovereign God with whom the powers of darkness were in conflict.

The Revelation of Jesus Christ to John is such a work. John was given a vision of what was going on in the cosmic drama. He was in exile for his testimony to Jesus. The Christian community for which he wrote the vision was experiencing severe persecution. Some were giving up their faith, returning to the imperial cult. John writes to encourage them to be faithful, to hold on.

Chapters 12-14 are the center of the Revelation. A woman is pregnant. A dragon is poised to consume the child. The woman gives birth and the child is snatched up to heaven. There is war in heaven and Michael, God's Angel Warrior, with the heavenly hosts defeats the dragon who is thrown down to earth. Although the victory is won in heaven there remains the mopping up on earth where the defeated dragon is causing all the hell he can. The saints suffer greatly; yet they sing of triumph because they know the ultimate victory is theirs because God has

conquered - for 1250 days, 42 months, they suffer the ravages of the dragon, but this is a brief period.

If you go to the Hebrew Scriptures, Numbers 33, you will find that Israel made 42 moves on the way to the Promised Land. Thus, the writer says -Hold fast; this journey so full of suffering will end in the security of God's Kingdom.

A story, a vision. It borrows images from the Hebrew Scriptures – the Exodus, the wilderness wandering; the woman, Eve, Genesis 3:15, the seed of the woman will bruise the head of the serpent; the woman - Mary, pregnant with child; the child snatched up to heaven - but through death and resurrection by which victory is achieved, the dragon falls.

Well, I cannot give you a full account of the rich imagery of this vision, but I think you can see how the vision weaves together images from Israel's history and the event of Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection.

Out of historical happenings whose details we can never recover, a story is told to convey a deeply held conviction that in the end God will reign, the God of life and light having conquered the forces of darkness that threaten human existence and bring death.

Now here is an interesting fact - In Greek mythology, Zeus was the chief god. His consort, Leto, was with child. The dragon Python was determined to kill the child. Leto fled to the island of Delos where Apollo was born in safety. Eventually Apollo returned to the mainland and at the great shrine, Delphi, Apollo slew the dragon.

When John, on the island of Patmos, not far from the island of Delos, told his story in vision form, he borrowed not only from the Hebrew tradition, but also from Greek mythology to convey the message - that the God of life and light will finally overcome the forces of evil and darkness.

The biblical story as a whole is rooted in the conviction that finally God will subdue the darkness. It is the same conviction that underlays the beloved fairy tales of our childhood.

That is faith's conviction. That is hope's ground - God is love.

Love triumphs.

Truth triumphs.

Therefore, trust.

Now, that's the story; that's what we celebrate. Just to tell you that straight out may get us into an intellectual discussion and you might say, "Well, the data is

ambiguous." You might end up not trusting; maybe you would become a cynic. But, let me tell you a story - deeper than reason can probe. You might then feel it and know it beyond knowing.

Don't you see it - the baby a sign of hope, of a future, of life?

Don't you hear the angels sing?

Haven't you seen a special star?

Don't you hold absolutely to much that you cannot rationally describe or defend?

If you have eyes to see, ears to hear ...You know it's true. The fairy tale is true -

Trust

Hope

Be of good cheer,

All will be well.