

Trinity Church in the City of Boston

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

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I Christmas, John 1:1-18

Come Holy Spirit, and enkindle in the hearts of your faithful, the fire of your Love. *Amen.*

What was one, very large house, had been divided into four apartments of unequal size and shape. She lives in the smallest of the four – a rectangular unit at the left, rear corner of the building – and her tiny concrete stoop was once the kitchen door. A rusting, metal awning, just barely big enough to huddle beneath, now shelters her as she reaches in her purse for the house key. There she now stands, the handle of her open umbrella tucked awkwardly between her chin and chest, her purse leaning precariously against her waist. She balances the purse with the palm of her left hand which squeezes the plastic handle of a generic 2% quart. Setting down the several, full reusable grocery sacks from her right, she roots around the oversized leather bag. In barely a breath the wind catches her umbrella, quickly turns her head and shoulders, flips her purse, and overturns a grocery sack, breaking a squatty, glass jar of black olives, its several dozen round balls sent rolling off the stoop and into the snow at its edge.

She sighs.

Recollecting her things, she stomps her feet to shake the snow off her boots and she cracks her door, just wide enough to *see* what she has already *heard*: her energetic dog, Max, running around in circles and yipping spasmodically whenever he approaches the stoop. “Sit, Max! Wait for me to come inside! Sit! Sit!” she encourages the little dog, but Max pays her plea no mind, and she is glad he does not. A three-year-old Pekingese and Poodle mix she calls a “PekiPoodle,” Max keeps his frantic circuit as she shuts the door behind her, using her legs as a trampoline to propel him into his next loop. “Good dog! Good dog, Max!” she says to the PekiPoodle, blowing him kisses as she leans down to allow him to lick and nibble on her chin.

She leaves the kitchen light and the bedside lamp lit whenever she leaves the apartment, and, having set her groceries by the fridge, she walks to her bright bedroom. With Max at her heels, she picks up the metal canister on her dresser, shakes it like a maraca, and smiles when Max leaps onto her bed and sits upright, his tail wagging madly. She opens the container and tosses a Doggie Bistro gingerbread cookie into the hallway. Max leaps from her comforter, bounding after his treat. She leans against the doorframe of her closet, exchanging her heavy boots for a pair of slippers. They are soft, and she draws a deep, relieved breath. She takes off her coat, unwraps her scarf, and turns out the bedside lamp. Before passing the thermostat in the short hallway on her way back to the kitchen, she deliberately lifts its lever from sixty-two until it is centered on exactly sixty-seven degrees. Still for a moment, she waits to hear the furnace rumble awake ... and it rumbles.

The third owner of the very large house bought the home as an investment property and subdivided it during the mid-seventies. Each of the apartments still showcases the colors of its redecoration: Avocado Greens, Harvest Golds, Rusty Browns. For her, who grew up in a similarly pea-colored kitchen, the apartment's stylings are comfortable, even if they are no longer fashionable. Her countertop, her laminate floor, her oven door ... as she puts away her groceries, the kitchen reminds her of her mother, and she likes that.

Her living room is long and narrow, and a continuous, open closet – perhaps what was once a huge pantry – runs the length of one wall. There are shelves from floor to ceiling, all more than a foot deep and over a foot high. She knows their dimensions because she keeps her vinyl there, and, to be comfortable, 33 1/3's require a full twelve inches in every direction.

She has more than a thousand albums, each one protected in a clear plastic sleeve and filed alphabetically, save for the compilation long-players, which she sorts by subject. The collection began with re-purchasing the music of her youth and now grows each Saturday, when she makes her rounds of the local garage sales, flea markets, and thrift stores. Rather than pursuing only select genres or artists, she invites a moment's mood as her muse. If, for instance, it's warm and sunny outside, who could refuse Herb Albert and the Tijuana Brass? Certainly not she. If she's feeling low, Simple Minds can rally her spirits, and, if the low is *really* low, a Bob Newhart or Steve Martin record can lift any sagging soul. She bargains – always – paying more than two dollars only for Elvis, Zeppelin, and Marvin Gaye.

Three days removed from Christmas, and three days before New Year's – in that sweet spot of fuzzy pajamas, warm mugs, and *Little House on the Prairie* reruns – she has decided to stay home with Max. Since the time of her niece's birth eight years ago, she has found it awkward to spend all week with her older sister and brother-in-law. They were never less than gracious about their invitation, and she believed them when they assured her that they would have been glad for her company, but for some seasons she has increasingly felt like a *visitor* – a visitor to a happy, Christmas exhibit she knew intimately and that intimately knew her, but of which she was not fully part.

Her mom and dad pleaded with her to stay with them, but she wearied of reassuring them about the quality of her life. Despite their concerns, playing Canasta with her parents during Christmas week did not mean that she was either unhappy or unfulfilled, though the sad looks they exchanged across her shoulder certainly tested her grace. For tonight, her records will keep her and Max good company, and she will meet her family at church in the morning – a Sunday-after-Christmas tradition (and expectation) since her grandparents moved to New England some eighty years before.

She lifts a small stool she bought from a local elementary school when it closed, and she sets it at the end of her closet, so she can sit and thumb through the holiday section, which is closest to the floor. Max sits behind her, scratching his ear. She first pulls *Sounds of the Season*, the 1963, local Methodist church's choir album of Christmas hymns, a weird and wonderful holiday favorite of hers. She touches her fingers to its cover, the cardboard worn soft with tiny creases, before she tucks the treasure back into its place. She chooses instead Frank Sinatra's *A Christmas Album*. Her copy is far and away the coolest of its several editions, an early-eighties "Limited Issue" with a pop-up Christmas village in the gatefold, Ol' Blue Eyes himself caroling outside a snowy shop window.

She sits on the sofa with her legs tucked underneath her, and she snuggles the dog in the Christmas throw with the tassels he likes to chew. With her well-doodled college lap desk before her, she starts to write her thank-you notes. Sinatra sings and she hums, Max snores and the furnace rumbles.

When it is time to flip the record, she makes herself a cup of hot chocolate, turns off the kitchen overhead, and lights the tea lamp in the simple Advent wreath on her coffee table. She borrows from Max a corner of his Christmas throw. Soon, the cocoa is cold and she is falling asleep, warm and content. And if she had stayed awake just a moment longer, she would have heard the velvety voice sing:

How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear his coming,
but in this world of sin,
where meek souls receive him,
still the dear Christ enters in.ⁱ

People of God, the most vital – the most important – theological text any of us will ever engage is our own story. We may have exchanged the lathe for the laptop, shepherds' fields for parking lots; but *believe*: the Carpenter's Son still plies his trade, and the angel of the Lord still looks to shine the glory of God all around us.

The Infant King calls us to recognize our own story as a tale *full* of characters modest and grand; of times fat and lean; of hopes fulfilled, emptied, and filled again: *What, star, brightly shining, have we followed?*

God awaits us in moments of despair and occasions of Grace, alike: *When was it that this world laid us low, and what angels spoke glad tidings to us? To whom have we given our gifts and giftedness, and who has shared theirs, with us?*

We as the Body of God must unbind, uncover, and unmask the face of Christ, drawn into *our own* countenance at the very beginning – in that time before time, when “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” – for God loves that child, loves her like the babe born in a manger, like the mother who bore him, like the father who knelt and held her hand.

We do not tell the Christmas story to fix a great distance between us and some unreachable, impassable past when God still loved the world! No! We tell the story so that we would find the living Christ at work in the intimate, ordinary world where we live and move and have our being *now*: from the grocery store to our front stoop; from our parents’ card table to the flea market; from the kitchen counter to the record player.

Gathering on this first Sunday after Christmas with flashes of tinsel still in our hair, we sing that the holiday is not over, but only beginning: **Love incarnate**, born in us today and always.

Joy to the world, friends. The Lord is come.
Amen.

ⁱ Brooks, Phillips. “O little town of Bethlehem.” 1868. I wrote this short story as a reflection on the “How silently, how silently” verse of Brooks’ beloved carol.