

“Christmas Truth”
Christmas Eve, 2019
Luke 2:1-14

The Bible has been translated into many languages from the biblical languages of Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. As of October 2019, the full Bible has been translated into 698 languages, the New Testament has been translated into an additional 1,548 languages, and Bible portions or stories into 1,138 other languages. Each has their own cultural and language bias. So, what is Christmas Truth? What really matters in the following story? Hear Luke’s Gospel in the Message translation, chapter 2, beginning with the first verse. What is the Spirit saying to the church this Christmas Eve?

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So, Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David’s town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the local inn.

There were shepherders camping nearby. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God’s angel stood among them and God’s glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, “Do not be afraid. I am here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David’s town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you are to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.”

At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God’s praises:

Glory to God in the heavens,
Peace to all people on earth who please him.

Here ends the Gospel. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Amahl used to be a shepherd. He used to support his widowed mother with his sheep. Once he became disabled and could only walk with the aid of a crutch, his mother was forced to sell their animals. She cried herself to sleep at night, worried that she and her young son will soon have to resort to begging to support themselves.

Amahl is known for telling tall tales. When his mother calls for him and he does not answer, she becomes anxious and then rather put out. “I thought you were right outside playing your flute,” she scolds him. He says, “Mother, you’re never going to believe what I saw! There is an amazing star, as big as a window, outside over our roof!” Naturally, she thinks this is just another one of his fantasies. That is, until there comes a knock at their door and three splendidly dressed foreign kings are standing outside!

The three Kings explain that they are on a days-long journey to find a wondrous Child, for they have gifts for him—gold, and myrrh and frankincense. They tell the wild-eyed Amahl and his mother that this child will change the world. This child will bring hope, peace, joy, and love to all who are weary, sad, and without any. They are tired and need a place to rest for the night. Amahl’s mother ushers them in, and Amahl can hardly speak, which by the way is quite rare for him.

His mother leaves to gather firewood and to invite her neighbors to a potluck meal in honor of the three curious visitors. While she is gone, Amahl finds his tongue and asks the three kings questions about their homeland and their inspired mission.

King Balthazar tells the boy about his life as a king. King Kaspar, who is childlike himself, eccentric and nearly deaf, shows the boy a box of magic stones, beads, and licorice, offering Amahl some of the candy. The boy is enthralled, but his mother is worried that he is bothering their guests. Amahl tells another of his tales, claiming that the kings are asking *him* all the questions!

After the neighbors have left and the kings have fallen off to sleep, Amahl's mother, in her desperation, steals some of King Melchior's gold that is meant for the Christ Child. The kings' page catches her in the act and yells, "Thief! Thief!" He grabs the gold from her and Amahl grabs him in protection of his mother. King Melchior, understanding why she stole the gold, tells her she can keep it, as the Holy Child will not need earthly riches or power to build his kingdom.

Amahl's mother is deeply ashamed, but also quite moved by King Melchior's adoration of the newborn child. She has waited all her life for a king who will fulfill her hopes, bring peace to the broken world, joy to her joyless existence, and love to all people everywhere. She asks the king to take back the gold and give it to the Christ child, for she wishes to honor him, but has nothing of her own to offer him.

Amahl quietly brings the kings his crutch, his only possession, holding it out gingerly to them as an offering for this newborn king. At that moment, and this is the honest truth, he is miraculously healed! He is no longer lame, and with his mother's blessing, Amahl leaves with the three wise kings. They will follow the star to where the Child is laying. There he will offer his crutch to the newborn babe in thanks for his miracle.

Gian Carlo Menotti wrote the opera, “Amahl and the Night Visitors,” remembering his own childhood in Italy. In Italy, there is no Santa Clause. He thought as a small boy that, “I suppose that Santa Claus is much too busy with American children to be able to handle Italian children as well.” Their gifts were brought instead by the Three Kings.

Fond of his own tall tales, this was his Christmas truth:

I actually never met the Three Kings—it didn't matter how hard my little brother and I tried to keep awake at night to catch a glimpse of the Three Royal Visitors, we would always fall asleep just before they arrived. But I do remember hearing them. I remember the weird cadence of their song in the dark distance; I remember the brittle sound of the camel's hooves crushing the frozen snow; and I remember the mysterious tinkling of their silver bridles.

My favorite king was King Melchior, because he was the oldest and had a long white beard. My brother's favorite was King Kaspar. He insisted that this king was a little crazy and quite deaf. I don't know why he was so positive about his being deaf. I suspect it was because dear King Kaspar never brought him all the gifts he requested. He was also rather puzzled by the fact that King Kaspar carried the myrrh, which appeared to him as a rather eccentric gift, for he never quite understood what the word meant.

To these Three Kings I mainly owe the happy Christmas seasons of my childhood and I should have remained very grateful to them. Instead, I came to America and soon forgot all about them, for here at Christmas time one sees so many Santa Clauses scattered all over town. Then there is the big Christmas tree in Rockefeller Plaza, the elaborate toy windows on Fifth Avenue, the one-hundred-voice choir in Grand Central Station, the innumerable Christmas carols on radio and television—and all these things made me forget the three dear old Kings of my old childhood. But in 1951 I found myself in serious difficulty. I had been commissioned by the National Broadcasting Company to write an opera for television, with Christmas as deadline, and I simply didn't have one idea in my head. One November afternoon as I was walking rather gloomily through the rooms of the Metropolitan Museum, I chanced to stop in front of the Adoration of the Kings by Hieronymus Bosch, and as I was looking at it, suddenly I heard again, coming from the distant blue hills, the weird song of the Three Kings. I then realized they had come back to me and had brought me a gift.

Nothing is more honest than the Christmas Truth once experienced and later reclaimed in our unique Christmas stories. Christmas Hope is a renewable resource, available to us every morning when we awaken and give thanks for a new opportunity to serve the Christ child.

Christmas Hope lives in our imaginings of what could be if we could just find a way to throw away that crutch we have been lugging around all year and accept the healing that is offered by the Spirit of God-Alive for all Creation.

Christmas Hope comes to us as we dream our dreams and Christmas Peace comes to us when we give in to an awakened mind and heart, a spirit that yearns to bear the pain of the world for a while so that others may rest. That's right; we hold all our pain at arm's length, blocking our hearts so that nothing can get inside. But this is not really peace; this is anxiety; this is denial; this is that crutch that hampers the free movement of our heart. Peace comes when you offer your crutch to the Holy Child, when it's the only gift you have to give. For when you give away your crutch, another heart beats free with Christmas peace.

Christmas Hope is ours to imagine and Christmas Peace is ours to grasp. Christmas Joy comes as we open the door to find, surprisingly, the Three Kings have come to pay us a visit! What are the gifts that the Wise Ones presented to you tonight as you opened the doors of this church? Have you found your gifts in the authentic hugs of your church family, in the music, in the lights, in the potluck dinner you enjoyed, in these stories I have told you, or perhaps in your anticipation as we soon will light candles and sing of a "Silent Night?"

You don't have to pick just one; the Night Visitors brought to Amahl and his mother many, many gifts, some of which were immediately

appreciated, and some that were yet to be realized. God's Spirit is like that: some gifts we get—and *get*--right away, and others are revealed in their own time. The joy is in the anticipation of all the wondrous gifts God has in store for us.

Our Christmas Hope sustains us as we experience this night under the amazing star “as big as a window.” Our Christmas Peace is ours for the asking, assuming we are willing to open ourselves to it as a gift we can give others. Our Christmas Joy is in those immediate treasures and the ones we have to slowly and deliciously unwrap over time.

Christmas Truth, above all else, is about Christmas Love: love of God, and Love of the timeless and true story of the birth of the Christ Child, no matter what version is your favorite tall tradition, no matter what your favorite part is. Christmas Love is about the healing that comes when we sing our carols together, say our prayers, light our candles, sing our Silent Night wishes, and then breathe them out again, gently blowing Christmas Love all over this place and out into the world.

Merry Christmas , everyone. Our Advent Prayers have been answered! May we toss away our crutch and trek along with the Three Wise Kings of Christmas Hope, Peace, and Joy. May we follow a star and a story on a journey to Christmas Love. We will find Christmas Love in the person of a gentle, redeeming child asleep among adoring parents, awestruck shepherds, stable animals, impossible angels, and even more fantastically impossible, little ole' you and me.

May it Be So