

Years ago our television was blaring forth the picture of certain peril for some cartoon characters - I think they were Care Bears... The meal, unfeeling guys had the upper hand, and there seemed no possibility for escape for the sweet Care Bears. The shrieks seemed to jump right off the soundtrack and into our living room... And big sister Jessica spoke out to her infant brother Andrew: "Don't be scared, Andrew, the good guys are going to win." And they did. Her four year old wisdom prevailed, and all was once again calm and predictable in our household.

It's a familiar pattern. It reminds me of all the old westerns folks used to watch... The calvary would arrive in just the nick of time, or the unlikely character would somehow get the upper hand on the gunslinger... Evil would again and again be un-done by good. There is something incredibly comforting/satisfying about the dynamic.

I remember a colleague of mine once complaining, tongue-in-cheek, "What's the matter? Didn't God ever watch the westerns? If so, why doesn't God operate like Roy Rogers, Gene Autry, John Wayne? Why doesn't God use his power, influence, and ingenuity to drive evil out of the world? Why doesn't God maneuver things so that the good guys show up the bad guys, so that right can triumph over wrong? Why does God delay?" Today, we might wonder why God doesn't make a clear path to safety for the refugees from Syria, and why God doesn't stymie all those who are participating in terrorism and computer hacking... Why doesn't God make it CLEAR that the "good guys" will win? If we can even tell who the "good guys" really are these days...

Christmas tells a different kind of story. It tells us that God doesn't choose to come to us like a hero, but instead in strange and unpredictable ways. Even as our human nature strives to keep the predictable and the familiar in church and Christmas, the Christmas event itself will not let those who take it seriously settle back into any kind of comfortable story.

God's coming into the world in tiny infant is strange - really strange. It does not seem strange to us because we have been steeped in the Christian tradition. Over the years Christianity has "prettied" the Christmas story, domesticating, decorating, and sentimentalizing God's coming. What really happened in the hill town of Bethlehem has been painted in pageants and dramas in such lights as to be untouchable. We have made it unreal, with a child "no crying he makes..." We have bathed it in heavenly light and set it on a pedestal where it can make little claim on the reality of our lives. Perhaps that's part of the reason so many who were brought up as Christians have now decided that the church has little to say to them. "Nice story, but it has nothing to do with my life," declared a 30 year-old.

The thing is, the story of Jesus being born into this world is NOT a nice story! It's a story of poor people struggling in a country occupied by a superpower, dealing with taxes and crime and even a king (Herod) who will kill innocent babies in order to protect his own status. Reminds me of Assad in Syria. Nothing sweet or nice.

In 1977, the movie, "Oh, God!" hit the theaters. I was in the South at the time, and vividly recall the varied reception given the movie. As you probably recall, "God" was portrayed by George Burns, cigar and all. In the movie, the folks who couldn't receive this kind of image of "God" were very often the

"churched." These folks were totally confused, because they were conditioned to look for God in conventional ways, not as an elderly man with big glasses and tennis shoes! They were unable to apply to their own history the biblical history of God coming in surprising, even vulgar ways, working through the unlikely; never working from a script written by human beings.

God's work through Jesus probably wouldn't make it on television, because it isn't a loud, powerful fanfare followed by a satisfying conclusion where everything disturbing is pieced nicely together into something manageable. You see, this is the mystery of the Christ story: even with the resurrection after the crucifixion, the story isn't completed. **God is not afraid to leave things hanging... The story is open-ended, waiting for response of those who yet find ourselves right in the middle of it.** It's a different kind of story. It's a story that whispers of life to us even as the news blasts portraits of death. It's a story that actually begins when the book is closed and the events of human life continue. It is truly a new story every day, inviting any who would dare believe that God would have anything to do with the likes of us to be part of it. It's a story where a person decides to respond to the needs of another; where someone dares to offer forgiveness in the face of hateful acts.

As I consider our world today, there seem to be too many pieces, fragile and angry and hurting and scary. Conflict everywhere, within our nation and outside of it. Everybody wants to believe themselves to be the "good guys," but things are so complicated that it's really hard to tell. Israeli, Palestinian? Republican, democrat? Wikileaks or hiders of secrets? Police officers or those shot by them? Too many pieces, on too many levels, too much fake news, especially as we start a brand new year today.

It is good, as we open our new calendars, to remember the Bible's warnings to us NOT TO FORGET that God works through the unlikely, the foreigner perhaps...the one unexpected... God works quietly and persistently in the very midst of human life, making it possible for new life and hope to be born in our hearts.

This is the message of Christmas. It's a different kind of story, and it continues with our stories, in the lives of any persons who will only be open to God's strange ways, God's whisper of God's love and possibilities for creation and even us.

As we enter this new year, we do well to do so with our ears listening for the unexpected whispers and nudgings of a surprising, purposeful God... We are challenged to go forth in the faith that our God is at work bringing light into the world even when things seem dark or troubled, even when the noise of evil is thunderous. The Christmas story places the promise right smack into the midst of our confusion or fears, and urges us to continue it.

In his nook, *A Careful Disorder*, Stephen Vicchio defines faith as "walking to the edge of the light and then taking one more step."

A similar thought is expressed in the poem used by King George VI of England to encourage his people on Christmas, 1939, as they were in their first grim year of World War II:

"I said to the man who stood at the gate of the Year, :Give me a light that I should tread safely into the unknown." And he replied, "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than a known way."

And so it is. With the Christmas whisper of God's love, God's different kind of story, still in our hearts, may we proceed into 2017 - with all its uncertainties, all its noise, all its darkness - with our hand ready to be grasped by the hand of God. This shall be better for us than light and safer than a known way. Thank God! Amen!