

Christmas

The other day as I was walking Sammy, our seven-month old Irish Setter, we started heading home up the hill.

An older woman and her husband passed us by and the lady sort of whispered to me: "Watch out for the cat."

I hadn't seen any cat, but when I looked up ahead there was a big, fluffy white cat that looked as cute as can be.

It was standing off to the side of the sidewalk, and I chuckled to myself at the lady's warning, since, come on, my dog's way bigger than any cat!

We keep walking.

As we approach the cat it backs up as I expect, but then, just as we pass by, it jumps out, all four legs extended, wraps four claws around my leg and then bites me in the calf!

I'm not making this up!

My fearless dog, man's best friend, just keeps walking.

"Watch out for the cat," the old lady whispered to me.

It occurs to me that my little adventure has something to say about Christmas.

Because Christmas, at first glance, is so much that soft, white, fluffy time of the year.

Ashland University sends out an e-card last week that is all white

snow and lovely choirs and snowmen, with an invitation to join, and I quote, “in the sweet nostalgia of the Christmas season.”

Christmas!

It rolls around like clockwork, and everyone knows just what to do.

Drag out the ornaments and lights, listen to the children whine about this or that latest thing that they must have or they will die, get the Tylenol out as we get ready for all the parties and all the malls.

Christmas!

It's as regular as clockwork; we all know what to expect.

Just the other day the news had a story of a lady who keeps a 20-foot Christmas tree, fully decorated, in her house all year long.

When the season is over, the tree, with all its lights and ornaments, is enclosed in a giant closet, hidden 'til next year, when all she has to do is open the door, plug in the lights, and voila!

Christmas!

We know what to expect!

Or do we?

Christmas, I think, is actually like that crazy cat that bit me the other day.

It seems, at first glance, all nice and fluffy and safe, but, if you dare to get close, it's wild, it's out of control, and sometimes it bites!

We usually hear the nativity story told by Luke with the softly lit sentiment of a Charlie Brown Christmas.

But that's not what Luke intends his hearers to hear.

Peel back the fog of nostalgia and you will see there's not a single snowflake or Christmas tree in any of the gospel lesson.

Instead, there's an unwed pregnant teenager, traveling on cold muddy roads in her 9th month to a distant town because a big shot in Rome, who calls himself the son of god, (aka Tiberius Caesar) says all Jews must register.

Luke pokes a stick in the eye of Caesar because the one Luke announces truly is the Son of God.

Luke preaches in these opening lines of his gospel pure sedition, pure revolt against the Roman way of sizing up life.

Luke reminds us that Mary and Joseph don't make this arduous journey so that we may someday sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem."

They travel so they won't be arrested.

The nitty-gritty then gets nittier and grittier.

Those favored with the news of this momentous birth are not royalty, nor are they the best people; they're not even the religious people.

The people whose night is interrupted with the announcement of heavenly Angels are the great great-grandparents of today's Hell's Angels.

Shepherds are not the cleanly pressed, neatly dressed Clorox white

figures on this year's Hallmark Card.

Shepherds then are more like today's bikers.

They are smelly and, shall we say (to be polite), of suspicious character.

People lock their doors when shepherds come to town.

Think of them as gypsies, and keep your hand on your wallet when you do.

That's the gang the heavenly host opens up to; that's the gang that's first to hear the startling news that Messiah is born.

And what a Messiah he turns out to be.

No silver spoon at this birth, no line up of the rich and famous to welcome him in.

Instead, the birth is announced to outsiders because the one born is an outsider.

He is the stone the builders reject.

Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the son of man has no place to lay his head.

His throne one day will be a cross, and his wisdom is found in three nails and a tree; his wisdom declares that most un-American sentiment: "your will, not mine, be done."

That there's no room at the inn is not due to holiday overbooking; this is what the Messiah is.

There's no room in Rome, so go to Israel.

There's no room in Israel, so go to Nazareth.

There's no room in Nazareth, so go to Bethlehem.

There's no room at the inn, so go out to the shed where the animals are.

Out, out, out....

The Messiah is the one left out.

How does that fit in with Niemen Marcus gift certificates or sentimental piety or a Christmas tree stored away, fully decorated, til next season?

I told you, Christmas is a cat that bites if you get too close.

Annie Dillard, in her book *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, does some biting of her own when she peeks into our churches through the back door and sees the gathered and wonders:

"Does anyone have the foggiest idea of what sort of power we so blithely invoke?

Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it?

The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning.

It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets!

Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews!

For the sleeping God may awake someday and take offense, or the waking God may draw us to where we can never return."

Yes, when you get close to Christmas, it can bite.

God becomes a human being in order to show us what it means to be human.

God's take on what it means to be human is so very different than yours, than mine.

It means letting go; just as the Word let go of divinity to be born in a barn.

It means forgiving each other, not 7 times, but 70 times 7 times, because God runs to each of us with arms of forgiveness spread wide, ready to embrace you and you and you.

It means having the sheer guts to look hard at the world we have created, a world that says if I can't see, hear, feel or touch it, it's not real; and to look again and perhaps steal a glimpse of that which dances just behind the thin veil separating heaven from earth.

And it means that Christmas doesn't end the day after tomorrow.

Instead,

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,

When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:

To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.
Howard Thurman, The Work of Christmas

The one who comes to us as an outsider this night, sends us to those
who are outsiders too.

May you, my friends, in the coming year heal the sick and feed the
hungry and rebuild neighborhoods and bring peace, and as you do ---
a whispered warning --- watch out for the cat.

Merry Christmas!