

Title: The News is Bigger Than You Thought  
Text: John 10:11 - 16  
Date: December 3, 2017

We tend to think of the Christmas story as foundational to the launch of Christianity. We think that God took on human flesh *for us*, and this makes us feel good because we like to feel as though we are on the winning team. However, I believe the Christmas story should be much more than this. Let me be blunt. I don't believe that Jesus was born simply to start a new religion. I don't even believe there are winning and losing teams!

In 1952 J.B. Phillips wrote a book entitled "**Your God is Too Small.**" It had become something of a classic, and I have to believe that some of you here have probably read it. That title might have served me well today as well. "**Your God is Too Small.**" The bottom line is that this Advent I would like to invite you into a much more expansive view of what this season might represent.

I must tell you that I have been looking forward to preaching on this today. Yet now that I am committed, I have come to the realization that I have started down a path that is impossible to fully explore in a brief message. So maybe this is something we can visit and re-visit, and go a little deeper each time.

At the same time, I don't want this to become a lecture. I don't want to get stuck in our heads. So maybe I can maintain your attention by allowing this to be part story-telling and part testimony.

So this Advent I am going to be using this splendid little architectural prop to shape our imaginations. Think of it as a Children's Sermon for adults. In Thailand this would be referred to as a "spirit house." Typically, it would be painted bright colors, and it would always be outside. I bought this one when I was living in Thailand primarily because I thought it was a lovely piece of art. I had it in my living room, and when Thai people came to visit, I would often sense worried glances at the spirit house, then at me, then back at the spirit house. If your average Thai person were to see this here they would be aghast. You see, the whole point of having a spirit house is so that the spirits you have disturbed when you built your house would then have a nice new place to move into. You could keep them happy by bringing them little offerings each day. Now to be clear, it would really not be fair to refer to this as an aspect of Buddhism. It really represents more of an animist influence that has been folded into Thai culture. (And *that* is something that I would very much like to address more another day.)

For now, though, *why* is there a spirit house in your sanctuary this Advent? Simply put, I would like to use this as an object lesson. You see, I have some figurines that I will be adding to this each week, and by the time that Christmas comes we'll have ourselves a little manger scene. I figure I might as well upset everybody. Your average Thai person would be upset to see a spirit house indoors, and your average Christian would be upset to see little baby Jesus getting corrupted by entering a spirit house. But me? *I think this makes perfect sense!* I do not see this as a threat to Jesus' self-image at all. Jesus is totally at home in a Buddhist environment, and in a Hindu environment, and in an Islamic environment, and in an animist environment, *and* in Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church. You see, the news is bigger than you thought! It might even be bigger than J.B. Phillips thought. The Christ is at home everywhere!

I almost have to pinch myself to hear myself talk this way. You see I have always been interested in world religions, but what I mean by that has changed considerably over the years. Forty-six years ago I declared myself a religion major at Columbia University. While I probably

didn't think of this quite so clearly at the time, it was almost as though then I wanted to study other religions so that I could be a more proficient debater, shoot holes in other approaches, and overwhelm people with the logic of Christianity. It feels embarrassing to admit that, but it is true.

I think there was a psychological dynamic at work here as well. I think younger people find a certain comfort in defined boundaries and simple answers. As we become older we hopefully become more comfortable with ambiguity. Looking at it another way, we *should* become more adept at embracing mystery.

Now just so I do not totally confuse you, I still very, very much consider myself a follower of Jesus the Christ – a follower of The Way. However, there is a simplicity about this that stands in stark contrast to the complexities we create when we found a religion, and develop systems and creeds.

Richard Rohr writes, **“Organized religion... tries to “organize” what is always Mystery so that it does not seem so impossible, invisible, or contradictory. This was probably good and inevitable, and is much of the function of Scripture and Sacred Story. They take away some of the shock and impossibility of what we are actually saying. This made for a much more beautiful and engaging story than mere literal telling of bare theological “facts.”**

*skipping ahead...*

**But organized religion also created fast-food religion that did not make actual God experience needed or even available to most people. They just believed things or belonged to so-called special and superior groups. Transformation of self or transformation of consciousness was not deemed necessary...”**

So I remain very much a follower of Jesus the Christ, but as such am no longer stressed about those who say they are of another faith. If anything, I am quite curious to learn more about their experience.

When Jesus met the Samaritan woman – something that would have horrified religious Jews on many levels – she came around to asking a religious question. She said, **“Sir, I see that you are a prophet. Our ancestors worshiped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”** (John 4:19-20) Actually Jesus didn't say that. She was putting words in his mouth, assuming his Jewish identity. But Jesus responded to her technical *religious question* with a *transformational answer*. Jesus said, **“Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship God must worship in spirit and truth.”** (John 4:21. 23-24) Notice that Jesus did not try to get her to change religions! He pointed towards something bigger!

A similarly expansive thought comes up again in John 10. Jesus says, **“I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as God knows me and I know God. And I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice.”** (John 10: 14 – 16) Two observations: First, I believe that when Jesus refers to sheep that are *not* of this fold, he is referring to other groupings of humanity that do not fit into a Jewish tribal mentality. You see, the news is bigger than you thought! Secondly, when he speaks of **“listening to his voice,”** I believe he is referring to a kind of spiritual connection that transcends adhering to belief systems.

For decades now I have been reading and re-reading Thomas Merton – a brilliant Trappist Monk. In the later part of his career he became increasingly engaged with monks of different traditions, specifically Buddhist monks. This sparked some criticism from some of his Catholic brothers who were in essence saying, **“What gives? Aren’t you a Christian anymore?”** If you know Merton well you’ll know that he was still very much a follower of Christ. He was fascinated to discover, though, that once he set aside the heady world of theological debate, that *experientially* he had a lot in common with these Buddhist monks. Even though they were from a different **“fold,”** it was as though they were **“hearing the same voice.”** Tragically he died in Bangkok in 1968, where he was attending an inter-faith conference.

At any rate, I say all this to invite you into an Advent experience that is deeper than normal. Beyond the cuteness of manger scenes, and the warmth of cherished family traditions, may you discover a Jesus who was not born to establish yet one more religion with a tribal identity, but who came to invite us to hear a Voice that might allow us to tear down **“the dividing wall of hostility”** (Eph. 2) that Paul refers to. This Advent may you hear Good News that is bigger than you thought.

Let me close with a quote from Rilke that might guide our imaginations this Advent.

“I live my life in widening circles  
that reach out across the world.  
I may not complete this last one  
but I give myself to it.”<sup>1</sup>

Amen.

Rainer Maria Rilke, from **Rilke's Book of Hours: Love Poems to God**

John 10:11 – 16

“I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. “The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away—and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. “The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep. “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, “just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep. “I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd.