

*Based on Isaiah 9:1-5. No More Suffering*

A beloved Hasidic tale, as told by the author, Holocaust survivor, and Nobel Laureate Eli Wiesel, goes something like this:

*When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go to a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and misfortune averted.*

*Later, when his disciple had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayers." And again the miracle would be accomplished.*

*Still later, another Rabbi, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient, and the miracle was accomplished.*

*Then it fell to yet another Rabbi to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and that must be sufficient." And it was sufficient. God made humankind because God loves stories.*

Friends we have quite the story tonight. An ancient story of a birth and a baby and angels and shepherds and swaddling clothes and a stable. A story that once was its own modern riff on an even more ancient story of a prophet and his vision for a time when the human condition has been so transformed by compassion that the light shines and the fire burns and the space between - yes even the darkness - is held holy, if just for a moment.

These stories emerge from the most dismal of times: warfare and exile for the prophet Isaiah; occupation and oppression for the Gospel of Luke. As does the story of one Hasidic Rabbi after another seeking a miracle in the midst of misfortune. Stories of miraculous hope, it turns out, often emerge from dismal times.

In our time, as well, when we cannot fuel our own fire, when we have no prayers left to pray, when we find ourselves utterly lost in our own homes much less in the forest, this particular story continues to save the day, with its promise that an unwed pregnant teenager from the sticks can give birth to the most beloved child in human history and that a barn in the back of a rundown motel can become the beloved birthing room for a king.

We, too, endure dismal times, in our own way, some of us openly, others of us in secret, and of course the entire planet is still, three years later, slogging through COVID, with a colleague of mine testing positive just this morning and another colleague immediately jumping in to help, agreeing to wrap up his own congregation's Christmas Eve service a tad early so he can run over to their church and cover for her.

And therein lies the miracle of the story, right there, which is that somehow someway, in the midst of misfortune, at the end of the day, with God as our witness, we DO find a way to help one other make a way, even when it seems like there really is no way: when COVID hits at the last minute or the power goes out or the water pipes freeze or there really is no room left at the Inn.

The miracle of the story is that we really do still care about one another in the end, even with all of the mad Christmas mass marketing and the political posturing and the long-standing resentments that seem to boil over during the holidays, at least in my family (although surely not yours). The miracle of the story is that even in spite of every reason to give up hope, we really do still care that a baby was born 2000 years ago and we really do still care that babies are born today and we really do still care that somebody loves them and lo and behold most of the time that *somebody* turns out to be *us*.

Friends, the good news tonight is that whatever misfortune may lurk beneath your carefully cultivated Christmas Eve persona, whatever dismay might lie in wait just around the corner ready to take away your joy, the good news tonight is that the story of Christmas can transform every last bit of it into fuel for the fire of perpetual compassion in a never-ending story that really does save the world.