

SPG#82, Christmas Eve

December 24, 2005, Fr. Charles Pope

Isaiah 52:7-10

Hebrews 1:1-12

John 1:1-14

In 1961 I went out for the Junior High football team. In the weeks prior to our first game our coach put us through some exercises and drills that were designed to condition and strengthen us for the season ahead. I had seen football on TV. But I had never encountered the kind of regimented physical exertion that commenced. It was the world of push ups, sit ups, leg raises, and wind sprints. And beyond that, the coach kept reminding us that participation was not optional. And so I endured my way through the season. I never became a football star. And I never played competitive football again. But the exercising was good for me. And I wound up being in pretty good shape.

Across the church year via the lectionary readings for each Sunday we are called upon to do spiritual exercises. We are called upon to believe a statement, to participate in a story, and to find the personal meaning for ourselves behind what is printed. We are called upon to believe, or at least try on for size, fantastic things about God and humans. Across the scripture are recorded extraordinary visions and epiphanies and the encouragement to approach everything with an openness. In the life of the man Jesus we are called upon to entertain astonishing claims that he made about himself.

If we look at all the invitations to consider all things, they can appear as spiritual aerobics.

And wherever one comes out with any given exercise, your willingness to wrestle with any one exercise usually means you gain in some way.

Included in the scripture are those who witnessed the fantastic and responded. Some readily believed. Some expressed contempt and/or skepticism. Some were non-committal. As all of us wrestle with the fantastic in the spiritual life, it is easy to find objections of some kind or another in practically every person. As much as the disciples struggled with what Jesus said and did, so do we. For some they object because it does not seem to add up. It does not seem to make sense. For some there seems to be a lack of intellectual integrity in subscribing to one thing or another. And as many ways as there are to agree or acquiesce, there are probably that many ways to doubt.

For myself, I keep finding new spiritual exercises to try as I live out my life. And just when I think I have finally encountered all that I will see in my life, I encounter a new one.

All to say that at Christmas we find spiritual exercises that are unique to the season. And although the meaning of Christmas is the incarnation when God becomes a person, Christmas itself is not just about theological ideas. For there is a convergent magic in atmosphere and hearts, a good will that is part and parcel of Christmas. In fact, for many people, more than any theological idea, Christmas is that sense of magic.

And so the exercise is what we do with the magic. On the one hand we have very pregnant Mary and Joseph approaching the inn and the manger. We have the birth of the child Jesus. Then we have shepherds who see and hear angels telling them of the birth. And they hear the angels sing.

And after that we have kings who approach from the Orient following a star. Over the years we have tried to enhance that sense of magic by adding other figures into it: little drummer boys, and various breeds of animals. The basic figures in the scene have been enhanced countless times with colored lights and many, many other embellishments.

We strongly object when we feel like the business community takes advantage of the magic by trying to cash in. And we find ourselves in the position of trying to protect the magic from the commercial. And after Christmas we will again try to preserve the magic in our hearts as we return to that which is more mundane. But the basic spiritual exercise of Christmas is how much we let the magic in, how much more will we let the magic in.

In the eyes of your heart can you see a tired pregnant couple moving toward some place, any place to spend the night? Can you see them finally settling into the straw in just the right place in case the child would be born? Can you see Mary in labor? Can you see her giving birth to a baby whom they would call Jesus? Can you see a bunch of shepherds watching sheep, and hearing angels talking to them about a birth? Can you see angels in the sky singing? Can you see the shepherds running to Bethlehem? The Holy Family, the shepherds, the manger, the countryside, the town all comprise the magic of Christmas. And further it is a softness beyond that which is logical. There is a preciousness, a beauty, beyond what makes sense. There is a quietness that somehow winds up being profound. There is a love. No wonder we try to preserve it and protect it.

The magic extends and lends itself to our hearts in these days. And there is Christmas magic in our being together, in our loving each other. In the spiritual exercise of Christmas, do you feel like you are doing as good as you can do? Or can you let it in more, perhaps into an area of life that needs the softness, the quietness, the beauty, and the love?

I love to theologize. But at this time of the year, and I think more this year, I am just an old softie. And I see a bunch of other old softies out there. Beloved friends, Christ is born. Amen.