



making God's love visible in downtown Memphis

## Christmas Eve

December 24, 2024

The Rev. Scott Walters

One morning last week, when the weather turned cold, a little boy was walking toward me on the sidewalk, four or five steps behind his father. It was rush hour for the kids commuting to Snowden Elementary. The boy's hands were thrust deep into the pockets of his puffer coat, and I'm still not sure how this tiny person stayed upright since his backpack must have weighed a third of what he did. He was weaving slowly back and forth across the sidewalk. I thought for a moment he'd gotten into the wrong jug of cider for breakfast, but as he got closer, I could see he wasn't tipsy. He was talking intently to himself, lost in his imagination where he'd embarked on some magnificent adventure, no doubt. The boy took no apparent notice of the old guy who shuffled past him somewhere just west of McLean. And within a few seconds, the whole non-encounter was over.

Now, I know what you're thinking. It's Christmas Eve. Which means preachers across the globe are coopting the innocence and general adorability of children for their own, probably more sinister, purposes. And I concede that this is exactly what's happening here. But, since it's Christmas Eve, maybe you'll entertain the possibility that more than one thing can be true at a time. Because, as I looked in from the outside as some fabulous story unspooled in that little boy's large imagination, it felt like I was looking in not on something innocent so much as something holy. Something eternal. Something closer to what it means to be created in the image of God than the way my grown up mind usually attends to the world.

Maybe you've noticed that when Saint Luke tells us how the birth of Jesus came to pass, he begins out in the realm of emperors and governors, but he ends, just a few sentences on, in the pondering heart of a young mother named Mary. It's as if Luke takes each of us by the hand and leads us, possibly against our better judgement, away from the powers and principalities whom we think are in charge of matters that matter in this world. The people who end up in headlines and history books. Luke mentions these people mostly, it seems, to tell us where the Incarnation does not take place. The decrees and registrations are like the wind and

the earthquake and the fire old Elijah witnessed, only to realize that God was present, not in them, but in the silence that followed. "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." This is where the story takes us. Away from the emperor's palace and into Mary's sacred imagination.

I've read a couple of articles in recent weeks that concerned themselves, in a way, with sacred imagination. One was a warning. The other, something like a testimony.

In the first, Michael Sacasas says that if you were to ask him what the most urgent task before each of us is today, he'd say, "Resist the enclosure of the human psyche." I know. You're thinking, "That's exactly what I was going to say!" Maybe not. But he's playing with a historical analogy.

The Enclosure Movement in England was a process, over several centuries, in which the commons — that is, land which all people had a common right to use for subsistence — gradually became the exclusive property of individuals. As Eula Biss put it, "Parliament made property rights absolute, and the traditional practice of living off the land was redefined as theft. Gleaning became trespassing, and fishing became poaching."

Michael Sacasas believes that there is a present day analogy to our imaginations. I don't want to go into full on doomsayer mode in a Christmas Eve sermon. But if the Incarnation of Jesus isn't something more than a sweet story that comfortable people tell each other once a year and then get on with their lives, I'm not sure it's even worth draping garland on the mantle for. And I don't think Michael Sacasas is a fool for saying that there are emperors in our world who want to own, not only our common pastures, but the ponderings of our hearts.

Maybe the social media platforms that mine our attention and the search engines that learn what we desire and then sell those desires to people who want to sell us other things will be shown to be a net good for humanity. I am increasingly skeptical, but they may be. What we know that they are not, is harmless. In the wise words a 23-year-old named Billie Eilish sang this year, "the internet is hungry for the meanest kind of funny and somebody's gotta feed it."

There are aspects of online life that our imaginations feed, and aspects of it that feed off of our imaginations. And the imagination is the region of the human psyche where Mary pondered the wonderful ways of God in her life on that first Christmas. It is a sacred place. The seat of the soul, perhaps. Is it so foolish and backward for Christians to believe we have to find ways, for ourselves and for our children, to resist the enclosure of our minds for profit by the powers that be in our world? This is still the place in each of us where we treasure, like Mary, the ways of God when we encounter them.

I've thought a little more about that boy and his story making mind. One of our present worries is that he'll grow up into high school and ask ChatGPT or some other artificial

intelligence to write the story he's been assigned for English class. Educators are understandably wringing their hands and strategizing about this reality. But the real tragedy isn't about grading. It's that we may be forgetting what stories are for. Our minds were made to imagine them into being. If I'd told that boy on the sidewalk that he didn't have to imagine his adventures anymore, that there's a computer program to do that for him, it would make as much sense as saying, "Hey, kid. See that merry go round? Great news! There's a robot who will ride it for you, so you're off the hook." To imagine is to be a being who is awake and alive in the world. Maybe to resist enclosure is to resist losing touch with our own pondering, storytelling hearts, whatever our age.

The second article I saw was David Brooks's recent confession in the New York Times that he's found religion. Brooks is a journalist and a professor at Yale, so you might imagine he'd reasoned his way to God, weighing the evidence and coming down on the believing side of the old debate. But what changed him from an appreciative observer of religion to a seeker of God for himself were what he called "numinous experiences ... scattered moments of awe and wonder that wash over most of us unexpectedly from time to time." There was, of course, one at the foot of a New England mountain and another one at Chartres Cathedral. But the one I think rang truest happened on a crowded subway car beneath 33rd Street in New York, "truly one of the ugliest spots on this good green earth," he writes. And then continues: "I looked around the car, and I had this shimmering awareness that all the people in it had souls. Each of them had some piece of themselves that had no size, color, weight or shape but that gave them infinite value. The souls around me that day seemed not inert but yearning — some soaring, some suffering or sleeping; some were downtrodden and crying out."

David Brooks has given much of his attention to the workings of the empire. I hope and assume he'll continue to do so in his day job. But he didn't find God on Pennsylvania Avenue or Wall Street or the New Haven Green. God found the way into his imagination down below, among an assortment of ordinary souls on a subway car, shimmering in their infinite value.

Every age has its methods for enclosing the human psyche, for insulating it or distracting it from these experiences of the holy. Mary's child grew up to show us it is possible to live as a citizen of another realm. The kingdom, not of Caesars and governors and presidents, but of God. Power and wealth mean radically different things in that upside down country. Its grace and gift can bloom into being anywhere and anytime if our imaginations are open to it, he said. Like yeast into loaves of bread or mustard seeds into trees. Like the dust of long dead stars into a living human being with a yearning, shimmering soul.

Friends, I still believe Jesus came to seek and save lost sinners like you and me. But I no longer believe that his life, death, and resurrection were about satisfying the terms of some distant moral contract with our Creator. He dwelt among us as one of us to redeem lives that

are broken and fragmented in the ways that yours and mine are, in a world like this one, that would auction the ponderings of our immortal souls to the highest bidder. Jesus lived to show us how, and his spirit can still empower us, to live lives driven by another energy altogether. Which is Love. Divine love. The Love that, in the end, is the life-giving, numinous force that a journalist encountered on a subway car, and that Mary treasured and pondered in her young heart, and the Love that has visited you and me over and over again in our lives, even if we miss its appearing almost every time it does.

Maybe none of the ways the imagination of this preacher intersected with the story of Jesus's birth this year resonate with the way your mind gets enclosed and sealed off from the experience of that Love. But, if we're truthful, we know what our enclosures are made of. Maybe it's some aspect of a brave new digital world. Maybe old hurts, nagging resentments, simmering angers. Maybe it's shame, or a worry that we're unworthy in ways no one else could be unworthy of such Love. Whatever is enclosing your imagination today, my Christmas prayer is that something or someone in your life breaks through so the full force of the God whose merciful ways Mary pondered her heart will come into yours and make you whole.

And if you don't even know how to pray for such a thing, even at Christmas, try these old words from the back of the prayer book. Remember that they've been voiced by countless souls across the years, which might at least help your soul feel a little less alone when it prays:

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Emmanuel is come. God is with us. Ponder these things in your heart. And let the Love that became flesh and dwelt among us pull down your enclosures and bring your shimmering, sacred imagination to life.