

John 21:15-19

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"What Child is This?"
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Text: *"A second time he [Jesus] said to him [Peter], 'Simon, son of John, do you love me?' ...Tend my sheep."* (John 21:16b)

How many times have we seen it happen? The magic of Christmas does the impossible and Frosty the Snowman, made out of Christmas Eve snow combined with a magician's magic hat, comes to life once again this season. At least this is the way the media portrays the event. In fact, the media displays a lot of Christmas miracle stories which warm the heart and make us feel good inside.

These are what I call "sort of" stories. They sort of suggest an outside force beyond ourselves cares for us and loves us during the Christmas season if not even through the whole year. They are reminders that maybe a force outside our existence is responsible for Christmas and not the department stores who set up decorated trees in October. They sort of do this by changing the names and faces to protect the innocent (or maybe the religiously sensitive) and Christmas merely becomes a season of magic and wonder which soon fades into memory during a January thaw.

Yes, there is a certain magic to Christmas. Yes, an outside force does break into the hum-drum routine of a weary world. But, we do not need to change the names and the faces to protect the innocent. We know this to be the celebration of a birth of New Being, New Awareness, New Hope, New Faith, and New Love. This is the Christ Child. The long expected Jesus. Centuries before his arrival Isaiah stirs the imagination with this description. *"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."*

Eventually, however, those who heard Isaiah and lived in high expectation and even we who live in the light of the Christ Child's history, have come to view him as a do-it-all Messiah. We need only to sit back and watch his ministry happen, be entertained by his miracles, and awed by his wisdom. But the Messiah came with expectations of us; the expectation of choice. With his coming we are free to choose God's way of life and love or choose our own way of selfishness and anxiety. No amount of magic will save us from this choice. The ball is in our court. The decision rests on our shoulders. Choose for God, or choose for ourselves.

When serving our church in Iowa, we discovered a culture of people who prized their meat markets. Iowa farmers raise the nicest pork and beef I've tasted anywhere and every grocery store has a hustling, bustling meat counter with at least six to eight young butchers (all men) ready to serve anyone the finest meat in America. One day Mary and I went to our favorite supermarket and she gave me a list of items to get from the meat counter while she ran off to gather other things. I discovered something that day. I was the only male waiting to be served. Soon, I realized the impossibility of my task. Everything would have been alright had I been a grandmotherly person. They got served quickly with gentile respect. Had I been more like a mom the guys behind the counter would have taken my order fast with a furious efficiency concluding with a salute and *"Thank you mam!"* Had I been a beautiful brunette or a buxom blond half a dozen butchers would have tripped over each other just to take my order. But alas, I didn't fit the bill. I was too polite, or should I say timid, to cut off the older woman standing behind me and getting served first. After all, I'm a minister and need to maintain a modicum of respect. It should also be noted she carried an awfully big purse.

I waited a while and Mary finally showed up having completed her list. She asked me if I had filled my order yet. She was interrupted about mid sentence, though, by a butcher who asked, *"May I help you mam?"* The whole point of this illustration is to point out the power of choice. The butchers were selective in their choosing. They chose, for various and somewhat understandable reasons, to serve women first. They had their own ulterior motives and agendas for doing this and thus, satisfied the choices of the self.

When the Christ Child confronts our lives, we find ourselves standing at the crossroads of change. We can choose to take the same path we presently find ourselves on, or we can choose a new path which will radically and wholistically change our lives for the better. When the Christ Child confronts our lives we will stand at a spiritual, or moral, or ethical crossroads. This will happen many, many times in our lifetimes and we will have the power to choose the easy way, the other way, or his way. Perhaps the largest element persuading our choice is desire. Do we want to change? Do we wish to choose for God or for ourselves? This reminds me of the joke I heard a while back which asks, *"How many psychiatrists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but it has to want to change."*

When the resurrected Christ confronted the life of Peter, his disciple, who betrayed him three times before the rooster crowed early Good Friday morning, I wonder how Peter felt. The same Peter who had

chosen a different path, the selfish path, was asked by his master three times, *"Simon, son of John, do you love me?"* Twice Peter responded, *"Yes, Lord; you know that I love you."* The third time it was too much for him because, we are told, he grieved when the question came to him. Reaching a point of despair Peter cried out, *"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."* Once again, Peter stood at a crossroad in life. Confronted by the Christ, he had to choose; choose for God, or choose for the self. This time, he chose for God. Now he selected the path of life. Nothing magical about it. The power of choice was given to him. The change came when he walked the path of God.

The questions ring down through time and history. The Christ Child is confronting us. Our names are called. We can, when reading this passage, almost hear the voice of Jesus and feel Peter's agony for ourselves. Imagine him calling us now. *"People of First Congregational Church, sons and daughters of the former generation, do you love me?"* But wait, before we choose Christ and take the first step on his path we ought to know what his path is all about. If we choose to change do we live in a happy ending like Scrooge in Dicken's, A Christmas Carol, or (in a more modern tale) the Grinch in Dr. Seuss' How the Grinch Stole Christmas? Choosing God might mean hardship as Jesus tells Peter. *"Truly, truly, I say to you, when you were young, you girded yourself and walked where you would; but when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not wish to go."* (John 21:18). Choosing Christ means choosing to not only receive good gifts from God, but give of our love, our care, and our compassion to others. Our ministry may not always be met with a warm welcome. Risk is involved. Rejection is inevitable. Nonetheless, we are asked to serve. Just as he told Peter to feed and tend his sheep we, modern Christians, are given the same call. We will be asked to act.

Christopher de Vinck in his book, The Power of the Powerless tells this touching story. *"One spring afternoon my-five-year-old son, David, and I were planting raspberry bushes along the side of the garage...a neighbor joined us for a few moments...David pointed to the ground...'Look Daddy! What's that?' I stopped talking with my neighbor and looked down. 'A beetle,' I said. David was impressed and pleased with the discovery of this fancy, colorful creature. My neighbor lifted his foot and stepped on the insect giving his shoe an extra twist in the dirt. 'That ought to do it,' he laughed. David looked up at me, waiting for an explanation, a reason....That night, just before I turned off the light in his bedroom, David whispered, 'I liked that beetle, Daddy.' 'I did too,' I whispered back."* de Vinck concludes his story by saying we have the power to choose. Indeed we do. We have the power to choose how we will respond to every living creature which crosses our path.

The miracle of Christmas happens when we choose the compassionate path the Christ Child offers us and feed and tend his sheep. This happens at St. Vincents when the hungry are fed by many including people from this church. It happens in Honduras when people's lives are touched by those of us who are able to help them set up a medical clinic which will benefit their community with many miracles of healing. It happens when Habitat for Humanity provides a home for persons who have no place of their own to live. But we keep standing at the crossroads of choice because even more work needs to be done. The Christ Child challenges us to choose again and again. The continuing miracle of Christmas depends upon our answer.

Matthew Fox in his book, Tales of a Magic Monastery, tells of his experience interviewing an old monk. *"I sat there in awe as the old monk answered our questions. Though I am usually shy, I felt so comfortable in his presence that I found myself raising my hand. 'Father, could you tell us something about yourself?' He leaned back. 'Myself?' he mused. There was a long pause. 'My name used to be Me. But now it's You.'"* In that monk's wisdom we may find the greatest miracle the Christ Child can bring us when we choose him. A change so profound we might discover we really can influence the world for the better. Peter and the other disciples knew it. We can too. The miracle of which I speak may ultimately and forever change our focus on life from serving the self to serving others. This is what God intended to do for us with the gift of Christ. This is what Christ intends for us when he gives us the challenge, *"Be compassionate even as your Father is compassionate"* (Luke 6:36). Can we really choose to be compassionate even as God is compassionate? I don't believe Jesus would have said so if such a goal were impossible to reach.

What child is this who breaks into our weary world with Good News and hope? What child is this in whom we rejoice? What child is this who displays a new love for humanity? What child is this who leads us to the water of life for which we need thirst no more? He is a child of God who confronts us to choose and to change for God. In this choice, then, we find the magic of Christmas. Amen.