Nu‘uanu Congregational Church

Christmas Eve 2018

Neal MacPherson

ONCE AGAIN

May God’s grace and peace abide with us on this holy night. Tonight we celebrate the birth of a Jewish child, and so I thought it would be appropriate to begin this Christmas Eve homily with a Jewish tale as told by Elie Wiesel in his 1964 novel *The Gates of the Forest.*

When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw

misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom

to go into a certain forest to meditate. There he

would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the

miracle would be accomplished and the

misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of

Mezritch, 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 prayer.” And

again the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order

to save his people once more, would go into the

forest and say: “I am unable to light the fire and 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 Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn 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 this must be

sufficient.” And it was sufficient.

God made human beings because God loves

stories.

Once again, we gather this night around a story. Once

again, deep inside, we know that it is the story that matters.

It would not matter if we were not able to celebrate Christmas in the usual way. It would not matter if we lost our way to the shopping centers, or if the containers filled with Christmas trees from the Pacific Northwest failed to arrive, or if we forgot the words to the carols, or if we got the days mixed up. It would not matter if we failed to send

out Christmas cards or order the Christmas turkey in time.

As long as we could tell the story, it would not matter.

It is the story that matters. We need to hear the story over and over again, for somehow we haven’t yet got it quite right. Somehow we haven’t taken its central message seriously enough. And the message is this: In the Christ Child of Bethlehem God becomes one of us so that we can become children of a new creation ruled by peace and justice and love. Therein lies the truth of Christmas. We need to hear the story over and over again until we will get it right.

But what is utterly amazing about the story is the way God chooses to enter human life and history. God chooses to come to us human beings in the weakness of a newborn child. God could have chosen to come to us as a powerful warrior on a mighty steed. God could have chosen to come to us as a king dressed in royal finery. God could have chosen to come to us in heavenly splendor. But God took a different path. God came to us as a baby, born of unwed parents, laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, crying for his mother’s milk, surrounded by rough mannered shepherds and barnyard animals and three Gentile foreigners who had come from afar. God came to us in weakness, as an outcast, but why should God come to us like this? I believe that it is because God does not want to overpower us. God does not want to dazzle us with kingly power or anything of the sort. For then we might say “yes” to God simply because God is mighty and powerful, simply because we are overwhelmed by God’s majesty. No, God wants us to join the new creation God offers us in Jesus because we choose to do so out of our own human freedom. For if we choose to say “yes” to God and God’s new creation out of our human freedom, then real and lasting transformation is possible.

As William Sloane Coffin once said: We want God to be strong so that we can we can be weak. But God chooses to become weak so that we can become strong. And my brothers and sisters, we do indeed need to be strong. There are too many injustices, too much human misery, too much falsehood in high places, too much hatred, too much warfare for us to be anything but strong. What the story calls us to is a strength of will that will resist all the inhumanity we have been witnessing at the U.S. – Mexico border, all the neglect of the working poor and the homeless of our city, all the assaults on the integrity of the created order.

This is a time for strength, not weakness. So that is why God chooses to become weak for our sakes. God takes on human weakness so that we can say “yes” out of our human freedom, so that we can choose to be citizens of a new creation ruled by love, peace, and justice. God chooses to go to the very depths of our humanity, not to the places of human strength, but to the places of human weakness and vulnerability, in order to show us that there is nothing in our human experience that God is not willing to experience. And if, out of a deep love for us, God can do that for us, there is absolutely nothing that should prevent us from becoming the human beings we were created to be – human beings ruled by love and peace and justice – human beings of the new creation God has created for us in Jesus Christ our Lord.

As for that new creation, I believe that we are on our way towards its fulfillment but in all honesty, we have not yet arrived. And that is why we must hear the story once again. We must hear the story again and again until we get it right. God help us so to do.

Now, as we are gathered around the story of this holy night, I invite you to turn to one another and quietly wish one another a blessed Christmas.