

“Keep It Simple”
Luke 1:46-56
December 4, 2011

So, let’s start in a weird place this morning. When I was a kid in Iowa, I was a huge Cubs fan, back in the era of Ron Santo, Billy Williams and Ernie Banks. I would come home from school, flip on the television and listen to Jack Brickhouse call the game. If I got home early or it was during the summer, I would even get to hear the song at the beginning of the coverage: “It’s a beautiful day for a ball game, for a ball game, today.” In my world, the whole experience of watching a game was about as close to sacred, as close to “church” as anything got outside of church.

I remember very specifically the day that Ernie Banks hit his 500th home run. It was a much anticipated moment--not that the buildup was all over the news or the newspapers or anything like that. You could just tell that Brickhouse was excited when he mentioned it in his understated way. When the home run came, Jack let out his, “Hey-Hey!” home run call. And then, the most amazing thing happened: words suddenly appeared on the screen, ‘500 Home Runs!’ “Wow,” I thought to myself, “How in the world did they make words appear on my television screen? Cool!” For a moment that little bit of unsophisticated hype almost made me forget about the 500 home runs altogether.

One of the problems with life in my life time is that the “wow” button has been pushed so many times, and the means of setting us up for the “wow” moment have gone so over the top, that I think we’re pretty numb any more. We can’t watch the news without having the announcer let us know that he or she has a major breaking news story, only to find out that the story is about the

Kardashians or that the story actually broke two days before. Before anyone can have any time to think, a panel of nine experts is already on our screen, telling us just how important what we've learned really is. And before the panel is done talking, there will be a title for the event: "Something-gate" or or at least something similar to that. If the event lasts long enough, we'll even have theme music that accompanies the coverage.

This is not just a news issue, though. "Wow" fatigue cuts across our culture. I remember the first rock concert that I went to--the Atlanta Rhythm Section (thank you very much!). The guys just stood there and played music. They were good. Now a concert is defined as much by special effects and dance moves and big screens as anything that has to do with the music, itself. I have had a running argument with a couple of young people about whether I'm right to expect the musician who is on stage to actually sing. My young friends tell me I'm wrong. After all, who can sing and do all that dancing? I find myself apologizing for expecting live music at a music concert.

Look at how much energy in our election process goes into asking ourselves who "looks presidential," not who makes the best arguments. Find me a popular movie that spends more time developing a story than it does blowing things up. Show me a 3-D movie where the 3-D actually adds anything to the film. Find me a football player who makes the play that he has been paid to make who doesn't then find some way to put himself on display for all the world to see and celebrate.

Our world is full of attempts to artificially induce "wow" moments. We are bombarded with hype. Sometimes, the hype even works and we feel a little artificial "wow" as a result. We think to ourselves, "Wow...that was really something." After all, as human

beings we seem built to crave some “wow” in our lives. However, the artificial stuff, the stuff some marketer hatched in his or her back room, passes quickly. Like Chinese food, we feel “full” but only for a little while. Then, we’re hungry again.

The experience of being stopped in our tracks by something in life, of being overwhelmed with what is unfolding, has a name: it’s called the holy. To experience the holy is to come to understand that there is something far greater than oneself in this world. You might call that something greater than yourself, “God.” (Lots of us do.) You might call that something greater than yourself by some other name (Lots of people do that, too.) The thing is, though, that if you have experienced the holy in your life, however you may have experienced it, then you know the difference between the “Wow!” that wells up from somewhere deep inside you and the “Wow!” which is followed by something like: “that sure was some light show;” or “there’s some news for you,” or “that was a pretty good game.”

Let’s be honest: Christmas is full of hype. Gosh, with Christmas a month away, Black Friday and Cyber Monday are about as “hyped” as events can get. We get all the film coverage of people trampling each other to get an even bigger television. Then, we get the business reports. Good news! People seem willing to spend money they don’t have on things they don’t really need. The markets go up in response.

I have confidence that everyone here this morning knows the difference between the Christmas that the stores and the media want to hype for us and the actual Christmas. I don’t think one of us here expects to induce a holy moment by taking one more trip to Hawthorne Mall. However, that kind of hype is like the thumping

base that is pounding in the teenager's car behind us, distracting us from what's really going on.

Another way Christmas gets "hyped" is within churches, themselves. Is this the year we should ask Jeff and Joan Lynch to bring their donkey, Mary, to the pageant so we can raise the scale of the event? If we could only make our sanctuary more majestic, more cathedral-like, would we come closer to experiencing Christmas? Lots of pastors will spend the next few weeks thinking about that large crowd coming on Christmas Eve and having another crack at the folks who come Christmas and Easter. Is there the perfect Christmas message to be delivered that can bring Christmas and the church and faith to life for those folks?

Of course, all of those questions seem to forget that the story we are trying to remember and bring to life again takes place completely away from any church or synagogue. We may come to church to keep our sense of the holy alive, to tune ourselves to God's presence in this world. The holy, though, is out there to be experienced in all of life. We don't worship a building or a pastor or a book. We worship a God who is part of all life and present wherever we go. Part of the reason we tell the Christmas story is to remind ourselves of that.

The final place where the Christmas hype happens is in our hearts and our homes. Maybe if we're just a little more organized this year, if we decorate a little earlier, if we shop a little earlier, if we wrap a little earlier, if we're just more on top of things, then we'll have the best Christmas ever! Maybe if we put a little more pressure on ourselves to say and do all the right things and a little more pressure on those we love to live up to our expectations, then we'll have the best Christmas ever. Of course, maybe if we do all that we are just going to increase our chances of missing Christmas

altogether! A lot of people expend so much energy preparing for Christmas that they are too exhausted to enjoy it and take it into their hearts when it finally arrives.

If you want to experience Christmas differently this year then here is my tip: keep it simple. Now, I'm going to quickly let you know that I'm not saying that you have to handcraft all your presents and somehow divorce yourself from the world. What I am saying is that there was almost nothing perfect about the first Christmas and that ought to provide plenty of permission for there to be nothing perfect about yours.

Think about it. Luke's Gospel begins with a little thank you note and dedication and then a genealogy. After that the story begins. He tells us about two birth announcements. The first is to Elizabeth, an older woman who has wanted nothing more in her life than to have a child. The good news is that after spending all her adult life thinking she was "barren"--a horrible word--it turns out she's not. She's going to have a son who will grow up to be John, the Baptist. Not only did she think differently about herself but all the people around Elizabeth began to think differently about her, too. Of course, it was about time for those folks to change their tune since they had done nothing but look down on her as cursed by God since she was unable to have children before.

The second birth announcement is to Mary. Mary's situation is even more complicated than Elizabeth's. Unlike Elizabeth who had a husband, Mary is engaged but not married. Engaged but not married and pregnant was a bad combination in that world. Either Joseph and Mary were both guilty of "fornicating" which was against the law or Joseph could get himself out of hot water by insisting on his innocence. As a pregnant, unmarried woman, Mary could expect to be shunned by her community, rejected by her fiancé' and perhaps

even stoned. And yet, the announcement to Mary (and to Joseph if you read Matthew's Gospel) is that this child is the result of the Holy Spirit. This is the Son of God. This is not what Mary and Joseph expected in their wildest imagination. It is awkward. Yet, they keep it simple by accepting what's happening, by dealing with what is real and going on, by doing their best to be faithful people. Mary spends a few months of her pregnancy with Elizabeth. Joseph refuses to sell Mary out.

So, the original Christmas had nothing to do with a church or synagogue yet it was holy from the start. The original Christmas was not only not perfect but in the world's eyes must have looked like a complete mess: "Don't these people have any respect for how things are supposed to be done?" The original Christmas involved no shopping whatsoever. In fact, all the evidence points to Mary and Joseph being just plain poor. No one in their own world would have given these people a second glance, at least until it was time to pass judgment on them. Yet, God does notice them. Of all the people God could pick, God picks them. Of all the people God could love, God loves them. It is God who gives the first Christmas gift: "If I'm going to be a part of this mixed up world, I want to come into your home. I want you to raise me!"

None of this should really be a surprise. When God wanted to reach out to a people, he chose a ragtag bunch of slaves in Egypt and chose a murder suspect named Moses to lead them. When God needed a great king, he chose the boy who was the only person willing to stare down Goliath to be that leader. When God needed a great prophet, he chose Jeremiah, a man who insisted that he really couldn't even talk. God can work through anyone. God seems to love working through the folks whom no right thinking person would ever pick.

Without the benefit of theme music or special lighting or a ticker announcing, “Breaking News!” Mary understands that something big--something holy--is happening. She is paying attention. Without the help of the “senior network messianic announcements” correspondent’s analysis, Mary understands what is happening. Her heart is wide open to the presence of God. Without a single speech writer or spin doctor, Mary’s experience of the holy transforms her and is transformed into words: “My soul magnifies the Lord!”

Keep it simple. Pay attention. Open your heart. Be transformed by the presence of God.