

SERMON
By: Gail Fricker

The Polar Express: Do You Believe?

December 3, 2017

Luke 1:1-38

Advent 1

I remember when I was a little girl on Christmas eve – I'd be excited all day. I'd keep asking my Mom – "Is he coming? Is he on his way? Will he get here soon?" And straight after supper, I'd quickly put on my pyjamas and I'd actually ask if I could go to bed early. My thinking was that if I got to sleep early, then "he" would get here sooner.

Of course, the "he" that I was waiting for was Santa, or as we said in England, "Father Christmas." But that excitement of waiting for Santa as a child, has lots of similarities to waiting for the birth of Jesus at Advent. The waiting, the anticipation, the joy, the uncertainty, the need to believe ... it's all there! And the movie, The Polar Express sums it up well.

Chris Van Allsburg, the author of the book Polar Express has a very deep spiritual faith. His books often deal with mature themes in childlike ways, like greed, the environment, loneliness. And Polar Express is no different. On the surface, it is about a little boy with a vivid imagination that visits The North Pole, riding on a magical train in the middle of the night. But on a deeper level, it is about believing in the unseen; it's about believing in something when everyone one around you doubts and when people say "it's not true." On a deeper level it is about Faith.

There are a lot of parallels between the story of the Polar Express and the Christmas story that we celebrate as Christians:

1. The little boy is filled with a sense of wonder and awe that totally carries him to a magical place. Isn't that the same as the Holy Spirit that can fill us and allow us to walk with the Divine?
2. When the boy is on the train, he meets a little girl that seems lonely, she doesn't seem to fit in with the rest of the children on the train, and we later find out that she's from the 'wrong side of the tracks'. The boy reaches out to her in friendship, taking her hot chocolate. Isn't that what we are called to do – to reach out with love to the oppressed and marginalized?
3. In the movie, the actor Tom Hanks plays many parts- he's the father, the train conductor, the vagabond who rides on the train, and later he's Santa Claus too. And yet, the little boy doesn't recognize him. Isn't that the same as when we see the face of Christ in others around us? Do we always recognise Christ in others?
4. There's also other characters in the movie that we might identify with – perhaps the greedy little boy who pushes his way to the front, who doesn't listen to the others, the one who is "Me, Me, ME", and who tries to grab all the presents – perhaps we can identify with his need for humility, and the message in the movie to be humble.
5. But I think the most obvious parallel is the need to believe! The little boy learns that he just needs to believe in the magic of Christmas. The words in the song say:

Believe in what you feel inside
And give your dreams the wings to fly
You have everything you need
If you just believe

Isn't that the same as us – we know that scientists have written countless books to disprove the story of the Jesus birth and his resurrection. We know that we live in a world where we are in the minority if we believe in God. And like the little boy, we know that we risk being laughed at if we say we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. And yet, we are called to believe!

I think Mary was called to just believe too. In our scripture today, we hear that one morning Mary is visited by an angel. Wow! That alone must have been pretty mind blowing. You could say that it's even a bit like seeing a steam train right outside your bedroom window. And then, just when Mary was perhaps regaining her composure after the shock of seeing an angel - the angel starts speaking to her and gives her some news that must have seemed totally unbelievable:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, ...(Luke 1:31)

The angel carries on talking, telling Mary what she must name the child, and how the child will be the Son of God, but somehow, I suspect that Mary might have just tuned out. I wouldn't be surprised if after hearing that she was pregnant – her head was probably spinning with thoughts. Here she was, a young girl, never slept with a man, and she is pregnant! It's no wonder that she asks:

How can this be, (Luke 1:34)

Well the angel tells Mary that it is because of the power of the Holy Spirit. And then tells her that her cousin Elizabeth, who was 88, will also have a child. I wonder how much any of this Mary really understood? She was, after all just a young girl. I wonder how much she just had to believe? In her innocence, she replies:

Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38)

It's kind of like saying – “if you say so, I'll believe.” It's like the honest belief of the little boy in the Polar Express. I am convinced that others' didn't believe Mary, just like they didn't believe the boy had been to the North Pole. I am sure that people gossiped about Mary, and spread rumours about her being pregnant. I have no doubt that they didn't believe her story about an angel visiting her and a miraculous conception. But through all that, Mary still believed. The words of the song in Polar Express say:

“Believe in what you feel inside, and give your dreams the wings to fly.”

It is no surprise that the words of the song that we have just sung referring to Mary as:

“a holy child, alone was she, and they called her Dreaming Mary”

Sometimes we also may have difficulties understanding all the Christmas story. Sometimes we might want proof. Sometimes we might doubt. We might have lost the magic of believing that we had as children. As the song says:

We were all dreamers, Not so long ago, But one by one, We all had to grow.

But this Advent season, this Christmas, I encourage you to listen for the magic of the bell. I encourage you to simply say “Yes, I believe.” And if you have not already done so, I encourage you this Christmas to simply ask Jesus to come into your lives to be your God and Saviour. And I promise you, that when you do invite Jesus into your life, then

“you have everything you need, if you just believe.”

I encourage to please talk to someone here today, if this is a step of faith that is new to you. The last words of the song can be a message for all of us this Christmas:

When it seems that we have lost our way

We find ourselves again on Christmas Day

Amen.