

CHRISTMAS EVE 2013
4:30 pm Family Service

Reading – Debra Zagaeski

Isaiah 9:2, Luke 2:1-7

A light shines in the darkness

Our first lesson is selected from the book of Isaiah and the book of Luke.

From Isaiah:

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—
on them light has shined.

From Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Here ends the reading.

Reading – Debra Zagaeski

Luke 2:8-14, 40

Journey to Bethlehem

From Luke:

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Fear not; for behold—I bring you good tidings of great joy: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth: peace, goodwill, to all!’

The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favour of God was upon him.

Story – “A Christmas Memory” – Reverend Feingold Thoryn

I first met Juliana Clawson in college. I had just moved into my dorm room and was trying to get the third of my fifteen Tori Amos posters hung just right. I was standing on my desk chair to get it hung really high up, and started to fall off. I have always been clumsy. I was shouting as the chair tipped over and then—woosh—the girl from across the hall was suddenly there to catch me. I didn’t know how she managed to move so fast, but she made it seem like no big deal. As it turned out Juliana had even more Tori Amos posters, so in the spirit of confessional indie-rock, we quickly became fast friends.

Juliana and I talked about everything, but there was something she didn’t talk about much: her family. When she did mention them she would complain that her mom and dad wanted her to go into the family business like her brothers, but she wanted to become a

doctor. I wouldn't call her stubborn, exactly, but I had a feeling she would get her way. Anyway, she took lots of hard pre-Med classes and studied like mad.

As the first semester finished up, we had made our Christmas plans. I was going to visit my grandparents in Florida. But then, on the last day of exams, I gave them a call and found out there had been a misunderstanding—they had thought I was going to visit for Easter, and they were leaving that day for a ten day cruise in the Caribbean. Well, shoot. Julie was all set to go home, and she heard my complaints sympathetically. After a little hesitation, she said, “Hey, why don't you come home with me? I'll probably have to pitch in and help with the business—this is their busy time—but you could help too, and you might find it interesting.” Not wanting to stay around school by myself, I quickly agreed and off we went.

I had never really known where Julie was from, when people asked where she grew up she usually just said, “Up north.” First, we rode on a train for about 24 hours up into Canada through miles and miles of snow and spruce trees. Finally we reached our destination, a little town called Tatamagouche. Julie's brother, Josh, was there to greet us, and much to my surprise, he led us to a nearby field where a helicopter was ready for us. I was a little nervous about that, but Josh bundled us and our bags into it and slipped into the cockpit so quickly that before I knew what was happening we were chop-chop-chopping over the tall green spruce forest, away from the few houses and signs of life of Tatamagouche and into the great empty spaces of the north.

A wisp of smoke in the distance ahead of us gradually lead our eyes to another settlement, with some houses and some larger buildings. Josh maneuvered the copter skillfully so we were set down in a clearing near the biggest building. Soon we were being greeted by Juliana's father and mother. Everyone in Julie's family was tall. Her dad was a big man with white hair and a white beard.

He wore big brown boots and worn-looking jeans, and though he seemed rather elderly, he looked strong and vigorous. It seemed funny to go from a helicopter right into a sleigh drawn by two fine-looking horses, but in no time we were at Julie's home, unloaded with our bags, and seated around the large family dinner table. Dinner was unusual: spaghetti with a sauce that smelled strongly of maple syrup. Instead of a veggie on the side, there was a bowl of candy corn and everyone dished it right up.

I had gathered that the family business was manufacturing and delivering some product, but I couldn't understand the way they talked about it. They kept teasing Julie's oldest brother, Tom, about having all the "A's"—Alaska and Argentina and Austria and Albania. They said that even with that new helicopter he'd never get through all those by breakfast.

As soon as dinner was over, Julie's dad pushed back from the table and said, "Well, come on, gotta get back to work." Julie's mom looked a little concerned and said, "You're working too hard. Julie just got here with her friend. Can't you take this evening off just to stay home and visit?" "Can't do it," he replied. "Too much to do." Julie smiled at her dad. "We'll help!" I echoed, "Yeah, we'll help." But I had no idea what we needed to do or how I would help.

I followed the family to the biggest building on the property. Inside it was bigger than a Target, and had more long lines, too. Every line began with a sort of machine that was popping out a toy onto a belt, and then the other parts of the toy would get stuck on as it went along the belt, and then at the end of the belt the toys would be scooped up by a truck.

"Wow!" I said to Julie's dad, and he said proudly, "Yes, we are all automated now in this section. Why don't you work down there by #17 and see that everything goes to the right place?" Before I could

even answer, he was gone in a flash. That family was quick on their feet.

Down at #17 a lot of things were coming together. This was the 90s, so there coming down the belts were lots of Barbies dressed like Spice Girls labeled for England and New England, stuffed animals shaped like Barney labeled for Michigan and Montreal, Tamagotchis for Tokyo and Tennessee, and Walkmans, boomboxes, and Nintendo 64 for Pennsylvania and Paris. In one lane it looked like Furbies were battling it out with Tickle-Me-Elmos.

Toys started getting backed up in one lane and I went over to investigate. A machine had tried to put a Barbie Spice girl outfit on a Furbie, and then was putting a Tickle box in Walkman, and then tried to insert a Nintendo game into boombox. It was a mess. I tried to pause the machine but none of the buttons seemed to work. I climbed up to get closer, slipped, and ended up getting sucked along on the belt. All of a sudden the machine was trying to stuff me into a Barney suit and started sewing me up. I yelled “Ow, you stupid machine!” “Hey,” the machine said, “You’re supposed to say ‘I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family.’” All I could say back was “Mphmmmmph” because I had gotten some stuffing in my mouth. Luckily Julie rescued me just before I was pushed into the wrapping room and wrapped.

I worked all that day at #17, making sure all the toys got the right wrappings and got sent to the bags with the right labels. And we worked the whole next day, too, which was Christmas Eve, but we quit at 3 for an early dinner. By that time I shouldn’t have been surprised by anything, but I thought it was really odd when Julie’s dad came to the dinner table in a red velvet suit. Then I looked around and everyone in the family had those red velvet suits on. Julie just looked at me and shrugged. I thought it was a joke, but they seemed to be taking it as a matter of course.

When we went outside I saw for the first time the row of big gleaming helicopters and the ground crews were just finishing loading them. Everyone but me and Mrs. Clawson headed for a copter and we watched them take off one by one as Mrs. Clawson checked her list again. Suddenly she said, “Oh no—Rhode Island!” I followed her out to the loading dock and there at the end of the platform was a big sack with a tag that read “Rhode Island.” “Oh no,” she said. “This is terrible—they should have gone with the ones for Russia and Romania. I’ve been afraid this would happen ever since we upgraded to that newfangled computer system. Now the children of Rhode Island will wake up and find no toys!”

“That’s terrible!” I said. “Is there any way I can help?” She looked at me for a moment and then muttered, “Well, the helicopters are all gone, but we still do have Nick’s sleigh...I wonder if the reindeer could make it one more time...and I guess you could fit into Julie’s suit she outgrew last year...” Things began to happen fast. I fit into Julie’s old suit fine, as long as I rolled up the pant legs three times and put some stuffing in the waistband to make the pants stay up. That wasn’t too bad, but the beard really tickled and the hat kept falling off.

Mrs. Clawson said, “You remember ‘Twas the night before Christmas when all through the house?”

“Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse” I continued, and she said, “Good. Well, Rudolph will guide you, and all the other instructions you’ll need are in the poem.”

So, with the sack of toys for Rhode Island and my suit that was too long and my gloves that were too big, and the beard that tickled, I found myself sitting in a sleigh behind nine tiny reindeer. I yelped as we took off with a whoosh and soon we were skimming along with the greatest of ease. I was feeling like a pretty daring young woman, when suddenly something happened and I found myself

dumped into a snowbank. Presents fell out of the bag, and some reindeer were here and some were there, and then I saw what had happened. One of the straps of the old harness had broken. I wasn't sure what to do, but then I took one of the shoelaces out my big boot, which was already too big for my feet. The shoelace worked well enough to tie the harness back together, but now I had to be even more careful or my shoe would fall right off. The reindeer were just wandering around and I had to get them in the air again. I tried frantically to remember: "Now Dasher...now Dancer, now Prancer, and Vixen...On Comet, on Cupid, on Donner...and Blitzen...and Rudolph!"

And off we went! The next thing I knew we were touching down in Galilee—Galilee, Rhode Island, that is. The first roof top was a little tricky, and I skinned my knuckles and banged my head going down the chimney, but I got the stockings filled, and I remembered to laugh and tried to shake my belly like a bowl full of jelly, but stopped that quickly when my too-big pants started to fall down. Then I was through and ready to go back up the chimney, but I couldn't remember how.

I said, "Up, up, and away!" But no, that was Superman. Then I tried, "For the honor of Greyskull!" But no, that was She-Ra. As I stood there and thought, my nose was itchy, and then zoom and bam—I was all the way up the chimney when I remembered: "And laying a finger aside of his nose and giving a nod, up the chimney he rose." I worked pretty fast after that and went from Providence to Pawtucket, Warwick to Matunuck. I filled all the stockings and put presents under trees, and after a couple hours I had figured out how to go up and down the chimneys without getting banged up too badly.

The reindeer seemed to be enjoying the whole thing. I just hoped that shoelace would hold. Once I almost lost my shoe coming up a chimney, but I grabbed it in the St. Nick of time. I was pretty

exhausted when nine tired reindeer, held together by a shoelace, deposited me and the sleigh and the empty bag at the Clawson's front door. Everyone else was already back, and Mrs. Clawson had a big breakfast on the table. "Julie" she was saying, "I wish you would reconsider taking up the family business. Your brothers could really use your help. I was proud to marry your father, Nick Clawson, and I'd be proud to say, there go my sons and my daughter, the Santas Clawson." But Julie just said "Momm! I told you no. I want to be a doctor." Her mom huffed. "Remember Julie," she argued "It would only mean house calls once a year!"

Well, I guess every family has its own problems celebrating Christmas. But I was glad I had come home with Julie that year. And so would the children of Rhode Island—if they had known what a close call they had!

Thanks for listening to my Christmas memory. You'll never believe what happened the next year I visited Julia's family for the holidays. But I think that is a story for another time.