

A Gift Like Kites
A Sermon by David Barker
December 24, 2011

Scripture: Isaiah 9:2-7
Luke 2:1-20

The woman is described like this: in her 60s with white hair, standing at the kitchen window, wearing tennis shoes, a shapeless gray sweater, and a calico dress

- small and sprightly, we're told, like a bantam hen, with a face not unlike Abraham Lincoln's...in a word, craggy...her skin tinted by years of sun and wind
- her name is Sook, and she's the only family seven-year-old Truman Capote has
 - the same Truman Capote who will grow up to write *Breakfast at Tiffany's* and *In Cold Blood*...
 - the same Truman Capote who grew up down the street from a little girl named Harper Lee who would one day write *To Kill A Mockingbird* and win a Pulitzer prize
- Truman's parents had divorced when Truman was four...neither his mother or his father wanted him, so he'd been packed-off to live with some rather distant relatives
 - distant biologically...second or third cousins...but even more, distant emotionally
 - none of these rather distant cousins particularly cared for or about Truman
 - none, that is, except Cousin Sook, and so it was that Sook and Truman, despite the decades difference in their ages, had become best friends
 - Sook, the mother Truman never had...Truman, the son Sook never had
- and it is of his relationship with Sook that Truman writes in a story called *A Christmas Memory*

It's a story that begins one November morning at the kitchen window...Sook announces to Buddy—that's what she called Truman—that it is finally fruitcake weather

- Sook didn't mark the beginning of Advent and Christmas by a date on a liturgical calendar or by the changing of sanctuary paraments from green to blue to white
 - Sook marked it by a change in the weather
 - finally, a morning had dawned cold enough to drive the birds south, which meant it was time to make fruitcake

And make fruitcake they did, Sook and Buddy...31 fruitcakes, in fact...fruitcakes to be given to people they knew but, mostly, to be given to people they did not know, but wished they did

- so they baked a fruitcake for President and Mrs. Roosevelt...for a Baptist missionary who preaches the Word of the Lord in Borneo...
- for a couple who, earlier in the year, had passed through town on their way to California and took a photograph of Sook and Buddy, the only photograph of the two of them together that Sook and Buddy had

Then, the fruitcakes wrapped and mailed, Sook and Buddy turn their attention to Christmas presents for the family—such as it is

- they work together on presents for the family who live in the house with them, but it's not easy
 - in the first place, Sook and Buddy are, for all intents and purposes, broke, so they have very few resources with which to work
 - harder still is the fact that the family there in the house look down their noses at Sook and Buddy as if they were just so much ignorant trash cluttering the rooms
 - “They had power over us,” Capote writes, “and frequently made us cry”
- most important, though, were the gifts Sook and Buddy make one another
 - Buddy, more than anything, wants to buy Sook a whole pound of chocolate-covered cherries because Sook once told Buddy she loved chocolate-covered cherries so much she could live on them
 - and Sook, more than anything, wants to buy Buddy a bicycle because all God's children, Sook reasons, should have a bicycle

But the gifts they want to give one another, no matter how badly they want to give them, are not the gifts they can afford

- so Sook and Buddy make gifts for one another, only to discover they've each made the other one the same gift: a kite
- Christmas day, as late-December days in Alabama often are, was windy, so Sook and Buddy spent it on their backs, in the grass, looking up in the sky at their kites
- they're quiet a long while, but then Sook says to Buddy, “I really wanted to get you a bike...it's hard enough to do without something you want, but harder still not to be able to give someone the one thing you most want them to have”

To you, God said through the prophet Isaiah...to you, my people who have lived in darkness...to you I will give the gift I most want you to have

- a child will be born for you, a son given to you...he will be called Emmanuel, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace
- and so Joseph and a very pregnant Mary find their way to a little town where the only place they can find big enough for Mary to lie down happens to be the place where the animals lie down
 - and there, among the muck and the mess and the smell, God's gift promised through the prophet Isaiah arrives: the Lord Jesus Christ is born
- the giving of this gift is, perhaps, the best known story in all of Scripture...a story people learn even before they know it's Scripture...the one story in Scripture that even most non-Christians know
 - yet, for all its familiarity, this story is still astonishing...astonishing and not a little audacious...the claim this story makes that the One God, holy and almighty, wants to be with us
 - most of the world's religions portray a god who wants as little to do with humans as possible, a god to be appeased and kept at arm's length, not a God to be embraced and kept in your heart
 - astonishing and audacious, too, is the claim that God doesn't just want to *be* with us but, in fact, became *like* us
 - even our monotheistic brothers and sisters, the Muslims and the Jews, will not go there...in fact, are offended by any notion that a God of the Second Commandment, a God who forbids idols, would himself become the ultimate idol: a flesh-and-blood human being
 - and, perhaps *most* astonishing, *most* audacious: the way it all happened
 - working class parents, engaged but unwed and with child
 - a virgin impregnated by the Holy Spirit
 - a census that probably didn't need to be taken
 - a trip interrupted at a wide spot in the road called Bethlehem
 - the Messiah greeted by goats and sheep and cows, sticking their noses in a trough expecting to find their dinner, finding instead the Son of God, wriggling and crying and wrapped in rags
 - Emmanuel, God-with-us, worshipped first not by kings and priests, but by shepherds
 - a story so astonishing, so audacious that the two versions we have of it, one in Matthew, one in Luke, cannot even agree on all the facts

Such a story begs a question: *why?*

--why us? why come to *us*? we broken, willful, wayward creatures...why would God want to have anything to do with you or me?

--why them? why a working class laborer and a teenage girl? better, don't you think, to have been born to the right kind of parents, in a good neighborhood, gold spoon securely between your teeth...Ivy League, Wall Street, Social Register?

--and why this way? an unwed mother, giving birth in a barn amidst squalor and stench, wrapped in rags, and placed in a trough that the last time the animals checked held their dinner?

--*why?*

--part of the answer is Scriptural

--God is faithful, a maker and keeper of promises...God promised God's people deliverance and since we cannot deliver ourselves, God becomes flesh to take our sins upon himself

--part of it is theological

--God's actions cannot be contrary to God's essence...God is love, love can only be expressed in relationship

--the One who loves must have one *to* love...therefore, God must create and be in relationship with that creation

--yet God's faithfulness, God's essence...none of that required a laborer and a teenage girl and a stable in order to be

--God is faithful, God is Who God is utterly apart from anything having to do with you or me, which means this whole astonishing, audacious story *could* have been accomplished some other way

--it could have, but it wasn't...it was accomplished *this* way

--and the answer to *why* it was this way of all ways is this: by becoming flesh the way God did, where God did, when God did, God says to every living creature, "whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you are, I am with you"

--we are never just distant cousins coincidentally sharing the same house...you can never be so hurt, so broken, so lonely, so sinful, so unworthy that you can ever be apart from me

--where you are, wherever that is, I am

Sook and Buddy lay on their backs in the grass all afternoon that late-December day, looking up in the sky at their kites

- “Buddy, I really wanted to get you a bike...it’s hard enough to do without something you want, but harder still not to be able to give someone the one thing you most want them to have”
- quiet again, they watch the kites twitching, Capote tells us, like fish swimming in the wind
- suddenly, Sook sits up: “What a fool I am!” she says to Buddy
- all my life, she says, I’ve thought you’d have to be sick and dying before you’d see the Lord...and I imagined that when you did see the Lord, it’d be like looking at a stained-glass window, like you’d only find him in a sacred place
- but I’ll bet, when you get to the end, you’ll find out you’ve been seeing him all along
- and Sook points at Buddy and then at the grass and, then, up in the sky, at the kites, twitching like fish swimming in the wind
 - you’ll find out, Sook says, that all along you’ve been seeing the Lord in things just as they are

Whatever Scriptural or theological truth was fulfilled that night in Bethlehem, to you and to me, day-in and day-out, the most important truth fulfilled was this: all along, wherever we are, God is with us

- I really want to be with you, God tells us...it’s hard enough to do without something you want, but harder still not to be able to give someone the thing you most want them to have
- I became flesh and lived among you because a relationship with me is what I most want you to have
- I want to give myself to you, but for me to be able to do that, you must recognize me...there, in things just as they are...recognize me, and let me in
 - this, it seems to me, is the story of Emmanuel...the birth, the life, the death of Jesus Christ
 - behold, I stand outside the door and knock...will you let me in?

It is, I think, a gift like kites...

- that if, on a late-December day each year, you and I will but lay on our backs in the grass and look up in the sky at the kites twitching like fish swimming in the wind, we can receive the gift anew
- the gift God most wants us to have...
- not merely in panes of stained-glass, not only in sacred places...but whoever, wherever, whenever, in things just as they are...the gift of God with us
 - recognize and receive...Emmanuel