

The Manger is Empty

December 27, 2015

Story adapted from Walter Wangerin, Jr. *The Manger is Empty: Stories in Time*, pp. 3-20

God's presence in our worship...we continue with our theme of God-with-us this morning, with the boy Jesus in the temple. Each week, we come to worship, expecting, hoping, longing to find God here; wondering perhaps how it is that God is here; wondering **if** God is here. In our worship, we offer to God all of who we are, our songs of praise, our prayers of lament, our longings, our hopes, our fears. Worship is our life-long practice of coming into the presence of God and offering back to God the stuff of our lives. It is our lifelong practice of making sense of how God is present in our lives and in our world. It is from this place of worship that we go into the world, to enact our faith through our daily lives; to make the presence of God real in our world.

This morning, I want to tell a condensed version of a story by Walter Wangerin called, "The Manger is Empty". May this story remind us of the many ways in which God comes to us.

My daughter, Mary, cried on Christmas Eve. She is 7 years old. She wasn't crying the tears of disillusionment, as adults do when they've lost the spirit of the season. Neither was she weeping the tears of an oversold imagination that Christmas Eve. She hadn't dreamed a gift too beautiful to be real, nor had she expected my love to buy better than my purse.

Mary was longing for Odessa Williams. That's why she was crying.

Too suddenly the child had come to the limits of the universe. A casket. She stood at the edge of emptiness and had no other response than tears. She turned to me and wept against my breast, and I am her father. What should I say to the heart of my daughter Mary?

Our congregation always gathers on the Sunday evening before Christmas, to go Christmas carolling. We crowd on the porches of the old folks. The children feel a squealing excitement because they think we're about to astonish the people by

our sudden appearing. So they giggle and roar a marvelous *Hark!* with their faces pressed against the window.

Mrs. Moody turns on her porch light, then opens her curtains, and there she is, shaking her head and smiling, and the children fairly burst with glee. We spill down her steps into the little yard, lifting our voices. Nobody minds the cold tonight. The white faces among us are pinched with pink; the black ones (we are mostly black ones) frost, as though the cold were a white dust on our cheeks.

And down the street we go again on to the next place.

And so it was that on Sunday evening, the twentieth of December, 1981, we went out carolling. Most of the children's choir had come along. When we finished our round of houses we went to St. Mary's Hospital to sing for Odessa Williams.

Two years ago she had been a strapping tall woman of strong ways, strong opinions, and very strong affections. Fiercely she had loved the church that she couldn't actually attend. She pumped me for information every time I visited her, waving her old black arms in strong declaration of the things she thought I ought to do and the things I ought not, as pastor, to be doing.

I had learned, for my own protection, to check her mouth as soon as I entered her room. If the woman wore dentures, she was mad; she wanted her words to click with clarity, to snap and hiss with a precision equal to her anger. Mad at me, she needed teeth. But if she smiled a toothless smile on me, then I knew that her language would be soft and I had her approval—that week.

Cancer finally, had laid Odessa in the hospital. And it was cancer that frightened the children when they crept around her bed on Sunday night, coming to sing carols to her.

I whispered to all of them, "Sing". But they shuffled instead. "What's this?" I whispered. "Did you lose your voices? Do you think she won't like it?"

"We think she won't hear," said Mary.

"No, sing the way you always do," I said. "Sing for Miz Williams."

So they did, though it was a pitiful effort at first. *Away in a manger* like nursery kids suspicious of their audience. But by the time the cattle were lowing, the

children had found comfort in the sound of their own voices and began to relax. Moreover, Odessa had opened her eyes, and there was light in there, and she had begun to pick out their faces, and I saw that Mary was returning Odessa's look with a fleeting little smile. So then they harked it with herald angels, and they found in their bosoms a first noel that other angels did say, and then a marvelous thing began to happen. Odessa Williams was frowning and nodding with fierce pleasure, her eyes squeezed shut. So then Mary and all the children were grinning, because they knew instinctively what the frown of an old black woman meant.

Odessa did not have her dentures in.

And the marvelous thing that had begun could only grow more marvelous still. For I whispered, "Dee Dee, *Silent Night*."

Dee Dee Lawrence stroked the very air as though it were a chime of glass. So high she soared on her crystal voice, so long she held the notes that the rest of the children hummed and harmonized unconsciously.

Odessa's eyes flew open to see the thing that was happening around her. She looked, then she raised her arms; and then lying on her back, the old woman began to direct the music. She pointed the way, and Dee Dee trusted her, and Dee Dee sang a soprano descant higher and braver than she had ever sung before. The children's voices ascended to become the very hosts of heaven.

And then that woman brought them down to the earth again, and there they stood, perfectly still, smiling in silence and waiting. Then Odessa began to preach.

"Oh children, listen me. You the best. Wherever you go to sing, look down to the front row of people who come to hear you sing. There's always an empty seat there. Know what that empty space is? It's me, cause I always been with you, children. And whenever you sing, I'm going to be with you still. And you know how I can say such a miraculous thing? Why, because we in Jesus. Babies, we be in the hand of Jesus, old ones, young ones, and us and you together. Jesus, he hold us in his hand, and he don't ever let one of us go. Not ever."

So spoke Odessa with such conviction and such fierce love, that the children rolled tears from their open eyes, and they were not ashamed. Mary's eyes too were glistening. In that moment, Mary had come to love Odessa Williams. She slipped her soft hand toward the bed and touched the tips of Odessa's fingers, and she smiled and cried at once. For this is the power of a wise love wisely expressed: to transfigure a heart, suddenly, forever.

But these were not like the tears that Mary wept on Christmas Eve.

On Tuesday, the 22nd of December, Odessa Williams died. She died in her sleep and went to God without her dentures.

The wake would take place on Wednesday evening. The funeral and burial had to be scheduled for Thursday morning, since Friday was Christmas Day.

And I was terribly distracted by a hectic week, with a children's pageant and extra services to prepare. My pastoral duty was already doubled; Odessa's funeral tripled it. So I rushed from labour to labour, more pastor than father.

Not brutally, but somewhat busily at lunch on Wednesday, I mentioned to my children that Miz Williams had died. This was not an unusual piece of news in our household: the congregation had its share of elderly.

I scarcely noticed, then, that Mary stopped eating and stared at her bowl of soup. I wiped my mouth and rose from the table.

"Dad?"

I was trying to remember what time the children should be at church to rehearse the Christmas program.

"Dad?"

One thirty! "Listen—Mom will drive you to church at one fifteen. Can you all be ready then?"

"Dad?" "Mary, what?" She was still staring at the soup, large eyes lost behind her hair. "Is it going to snow tomorrow?" she asked.

“What? I don’t know. How would I know that?”

“It shouldn’t snow,” she said. “You always wanted snow at Christmas.” In a tiny voice she whispered, “I want to go to the funeral.”

Well, then that was it; she was considering what to wear against the weather. I said, “Fine”, and left.

Thursday came. The sky was sullen. At the church, I robe myself and stand in the back of the church to meet the mourners. I keep peeping out of the door to see whether the family have arrived. I discovered Mary outside the door, waiting for her mother to park the car. She was staring at the sullen sky.

“Mary?” I said. “Are you coming in?” She glanced at me. Then she whispered, “Dad?” as though this news were dreadful. “It’s going to snow.”

“Come in, Mary. We don’t have time to talk. Come in.”

She entered the church ahead of me and climbed the steps and started up the aisle toward the casket. She was 7 years old and determined. Though robed and ready to preach, I followed her. Mary hesitated as she neared the chancel, but then took a final step and stopped.

She looked down into the casket. “Oh, no,” she murmured, and I looked to see what she was seeing. Odessa’s eyes seemed closed with glue, her lips too pale, her colour another shade than her own. The child was reaching her hand toward the tips of Odessa’s fingers, but she paused and didn’t touch them. Suddenly she bent down and pressed her cheek to the fingers, then pulled back and stood erect.

“Dad!” she whispered accusing, “It’s going to snow, and Miz Williams is so cold.” Immediately the tears were streaming down her face. “Dad! They can’t put Miz Williams in the grave today. It’s going to snow on her.”

All at once Mary stepped forward and buried her face in my robes. I felt the pressure of her forehead against my chest, and I was her father again, no pastor, and my own throat grew thick. “Dad,” sobbed Mary. “Dad, it’s Christmas Eve!” These were the tears my daughter cried at Christmas. It is death my Mary met. It’s the knowledge that things have an end, that people have an end; that Odessa Williams, that fierce old lady who seized the heart of my Mary and possessed it just 4 days ago, that she has an end.

How do I comfort those tears? What do I say? I said nothing. I knelt down, I gathered her to myself and hugged her tightly, until the sobbing passed from her body; and then I released her. I watched her go back down the aisle. She turned in a pew and sat with her mother. I saw that her lips were pinched into a terrible knot. No crying anymore. No questions anymore. Why should she ask questions when there were no answers given?

Later, at the cemetery, Mary said not a word nor held her mother's hand, nor looked at me, except once. When we turned from the grave she hissed, "Dad!" Her blue eyes flashing, she pointed at the ground. Then she pointed at the sky. It was snowing.

I worried terribly for Mary all Thursday. As it happened, she was to be the Mary in the Christmas pageant that evening. At 3 in the afternoon I left church and went home to talk with her. I found her alone in her bedroom, lying on the bed and gazing out the window. I stood beside the bed and touched her. The pragmatic pastor was concerned whether this child could accomplish so public a role in so private a mood. The father simply wished he knew what his daughter was thinking.

"Mary," I said, "do you want us to get another Mary?" Slowly she shook her head. "No, I'm Mary." I didn't think she'd understood me, and if she didn't, then my question must have sounded monstrous to her ears. "For the pageant, I mean, tonight," I said. But she repeated without the slightest variation, "I'm Mary." "You are Mary," I said. "I'll be with you tonight. It'll be all right."

We drove to church. The snow lay an inch on the ground. The rooms of the church were filled with light and noise. People laughed. Children darted. But Mary and I moved like spirits through this company, unnoticed and unnoticing. I was filled with her sorrow, while she seemed simply empty. The pageant began, and soon my daughter stood with pinched lips, central to it all.

"My soul," said Mary so softly that few could hear. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour." And so, the child was surviving, but she was not rejoicing. Some angels came and giggled and sang and left. A decree went out. Another song was sung. And then 3 figures moved into the floodlit chancel:

Joseph and Mary and another child, a sort of innkeeper-stage-manager who carried the manger, a wooden trough filled with old straw and a floppy doll in diapers.

The pageant proceeded. Mary stuck out her bottom lip and began to frown on the manger in front of her, not at all like the devout and beaming parent she was supposed to portray. At the manger she was staring, which stood precisely where Odessa's casket had sat that morning. She frowned so hard, that I thought she would break into tears again. But Mary did not cry.

Instead, while shepherds watched over their flocks by night, Mary slowly slipped her hand into the manger and touched the doll in diapers. She lifted its arm on the tip of her finger, then let it drop. All at once, as though she'd made a sudden decision, she yanked the doll out by its toes, and stood up, and clumped down the steps, the doll like a dishrag at her side. She carried the doll to the darkened sacristy on the right and disappeared through its door.

In a moment the child emerged carrying nothing at all. Briskly she returned to the manger, and down she knelt, and she gazed upon the empty straw with her palms together like the first Mary after all, full of adoration, her face radiant.

Not suddenly, but with a rambling, stumbling charge, there was in the chancel a multitude of the proudest heavenly host, praising God and shouting, "Glory to God in the highest!" But Mary knelt unmoved among them, and the 7 year old face was smiling, and there was the flash of tears upon her cheeks, but they were not unhappy, and the manger, open, empty, seemed the receiver of them.

Then everyone sang *Silent Night*. Candlelight was passing hand to hand. A living glow spread everywhere throughout the church. Dee Dee Lawrence allowed her descant voice its high, celestial freedom, and she flew. Having touched the crystal heaven Dee Dee descended. The congregation sighed. Everyone sang, *Sleep in heavenly peace*.

Mary sat beside me in the car as we drove home. The snow blew lightly across the windshield. I had been driving in silence. "Dad?" Mary said. "What?" I said. "Dad, Jesus wasn't in the manger. That wasn't Jesus, that was a doll. Jesus, he doesn't have to be in the manger, does he? He goes back and forth, doesn't he? I mean, he came from heaven, and he was born right here, but then he went back to

heaven again, and because he came and went he's coming and going all the time, right?"

"Right," I whispered. "The manger is empty," Mary said. "Dad, Miz Williams' box is empty too. I figured it out. We don't have to worry about the snow. It's only a doll in her box. It's like a big doll, Dad, and we put it away today. I figured it out. If Jesus can go across, then Miz Williams, she crossed the same way too, with Jesus."

It always was; it always will be; it was in the fullness of time when the Christ child first was born; it was in 1981 when my daughter taught me the times and the crossing of times on Christmas Eve; it is in every celebration of Christ's own crossing; and it shall be forever—that this is the power of a wise love wisely expressed: to transfigure the heart, suddenly, forever.