

How many times have we heard this story?

This year,
in your whole life,
on TV,
in church,

how many times have you heard this story?

Tonight the story is everywhere.

The story draws us into the warmth of this church.
The story draws us into concern
for those who won't go home to a cozy house,
concern for those who won't wake up
to a joyful Christmas morning.

We barely even told the story tonight,
just the outline:
Light shines in the darkness,
Word is born into the world,
God walks among us,
the darkness did not overcome it.
The Word became flesh,
full of grace and truth.

We barely told the story,
but still it shines everywhere.

The darkness will not overcome it.

That light shines in a thousand Hallmark Christmas Cards,
shines even in velvet bows
 wrapped around expensive cars on holiday commercials,
 in silver Hershey Kisses dancing on your TV,
shines even when you can't afford to buy all that you'd like to.

Even the darkness of consumerism
 will not for too long overcome that Light.

It shines in the darkness.
It keeps on shining.

The light shines even in Aleppo,
shines even amid the destruction
 wrought by human pride
 and the arrogance of religious fundamentalism.

The Light shines in the darkness.
The darkness does not overcome it.

That is the miracle of Christmas.
That no matter what darkness we pour out,
 the light shines
 and shines
 and shines.
 Never overcome...

That is the story we have to tell.

The story must always point to the light,
or it's not the real story.
The story must always point toward the grace
at the heart of everything,
or it's not the right story.

What is your story?
What part of the story is your favorite to tell?

I love getting Christmas Cards.
They all tell a story.
The story of children getting older,
taller than you can believe.
The story of a whole year gone by,
and this Christmas Card
is the only thing that's passed between you and them.

Funny stories,
sad stories,
poignant stories,
all full of grace and truth.

It's all full of grace and truth.
All our stories.
That story of a baby in a manger,
of the Light born into the world,
that's our story,
part of that old, old story.

We all come to this story
because it is our story.

Whatever we expect tomorrow:
joy and wonder,
a tinge of sadness
thinking of that phone call we won't be making,
because there will be no one to answer
at the other end of the line;
whatever we expect tomorrow,
it's all part of God's story.
Because we are God's people.

One night not terribly long ago,
I showed my youngest daughter a picture of my granddaddy.

I said, "do you know who this is?"
She said, "Welton."
Talking about my dad.
I said, "no, not Welton."
She said, "you?"
And I laughed and said,
"No, that's my granddaddy.
That's Welton's daddy."

She looked back down at the picture and said,
"I like his smile,
the way his mouth kind of comes up like that."

And all at once,
I was back at the dining room table,
taking a piece of peeled apple from him,
off his pocket knife,
as he said, "Here you go partner."

And I realized
as I looked in the mirror,
that like it or not,
I do look like him.

I already knew that my daddy looked like him.
But here, 22 years since he died,
the face I've seen in the mirror every day,
it looks more like my granddaddy every day.

I looked back into the picture
and I saw him all over again.
He never saw that little girl,
never even could have dreamed the life I would have.

But, as unlikely as it all seems,
my girls are part of his story.
A story that seemed to be over too long ago.
A story, I am finding,
will never come to an end,
because it is God's story, really,
God's story of redemption
and life in unlikely places.

It's unlikely.
But love always is.

About as unlikely as that baby born in a manger,
the story we're trying to tell tonight.

Babies always seem a little unlikely.
I reckon they always seem like a miracle by the time they're born.
And I think you get that feeling,
that feeling of an unlikely miracle,
when you look at a nativity,
or when you look at a Christmas card,
or even when you look at a picture of a church
all dressed up for Christmas.

There, in every picture,
the picture of that Holy Family,
in all the pictures of all our holy families,
there is God.

In the faces of parents
and grandparents,
curious on-lookers,
and those who wish us well.

God is in the picture.
Could be that God *is* the picture.

Could be that the picture of my granddaddy,
 smiling in his red cardigan
or the picture in my head
 of him teaching me to hold a pistol,
 shooting cans off the fence post,
could be that those pictures
are **my** pictures of God.
 My pictures
 of a love that has proved itself durable through death,
 love that keeps coming back to me,
 whether I deserve it or not,
 love that shines brightest in the unlikely places.

The light shines...the darkness will not overcome it.
The light shines in your story,
 my story too.

All of them,
 God's story.