

Christmas Eve 2022

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- [0 : 00] In 1897, Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of the Sun newspaper in New York. She was eight years old at the time, and her letter contained one clear and fundamental question. Is there a Santa Claus?
- See, Virginia's father had told her that whatever was printed in the Sun could be trusted to be true. So Virginia wrote in to settle this pressing question once and for all.
- Dear editor, I am eight years old, she wrote. Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus. Papa says, if you see it in the Sun, it is so.
- So please tell me the truth. Is there a Santa Claus? Virginia O'Hanlon, 115 West 95th Street. What that newspaper's editor wrote back has since become one of the most reprinted editorials in history.
- [1 : 10] His answer was clear, and it was concise. Virginia, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age.
- They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds.
- All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours, man is a mere insect, an ant in his intellect as compared with the boundless world about him.
- As measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge. Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus.
- He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist. And you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy.
- [2 : 17] Alas, how dreary would the world be if there were no Santa Claus? It would be as dreary as if there were no Virginians. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence.
- We should have no enjoyment except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished.
- This letter, which history now knows was written by one Francis Farsellus Church, has become one of my favorite pieces to contemplate at this time of year.
- See, I was raised in a household where even entertaining Virginia's question would have been considered near heresy. The rivalry between Jesus and Santa Claus was clear and only one could win out.
- For me, however, the truth that church so confidently puts forward are ones I need to hear over and over again. They are ones that I think we, who are so often drawn into cynicism, need to contemplate.
- [3 : 36] What has so often been called the magic of Christmas can remind us that our faith rests on two absolutely preposterous claims.
- The first we confront at Easter that Jesus was killed by the ideologies of religion and state, but then came back to life from the dead.

Preposterous. The second we confront on this night that the Lord of the universe somehow made their way into the world through the body of a woman in the form of a woman and very fragile infant.

Put together, these two claims mean that the world will be set right, that the new world has been inaugurated through the body of Christ.

Now, while all this can seem deeply suspect intellectually in our post-enlightenment world, the invitation to cry, yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus, is no less spiritually necessary.

[4 : 50] In some way, magic is real. In some way, as Church later says in his letter, the most real things in the world are those that neither children nor men can see.

I would add that those are things like hope, peace, joy, and love. The very things that frame our Advent observance.

In some way, this night, this night, we are invited to remember that the world is enchanted and we can again become those who dream, as that song says, fierce dreams and brave dreams and new dreams.

When we look at Luke 2, this famous passage about the birth of Jesus, we are reminded that the world often feels anything but enchanted.

Luke 2 opens with a census. In the ancient world, the counting of people and property by power, it always meant greater militarization and taxation.

[6 : 05] It meant being drafted into dreams of empire. And for the common person, it meant greater poverty was coming.

Sorry about that, y'all. The census was about domination. It was about control.

Yet the center of Luke 2 is a miraculous birth. That cannot and could not be controlled.

Mary and Joseph hadn't even consummated their marriage when their family was created. This was a birth that was not subject to law or to common sense. It was an act of resistance in a world of domination, in a world where it was foolish to give birth to a child in a political landscape where you knew they would be targeted.

Through this birth, we are invited to treasure the unpredictable in a world of control, and especially to treasure unpredictable joy.

[7 : 23] We, we are to anticipate magic because such anticipation is the foundation of genuine hope.

This birth is the imagination, the inauguration of an upside-down kingdom. And the news of it comes not to the powerful, not to the elite, but to the poor.

It's received not by priests in the temple, but by shepherds in a common field. The grandeur of God is announced through the mouth of angel armies, armies that wage peace instead of war, armies that actually sing.

Glory to God in the highest heaven, they proclaim, and on earth peace among those whom he favors. These are not the armies that bring domination and control, but rather they are armies of non-coercive love.

They insist that it is not the Caesars of the world that bring real peace through their, through their violence, through their law and order, through their, their, their, their incarceration and deportation and all the mechanisms that have always been at work to provide counterfeit peace.

[8 : 50] These armies make clear that the sign of God comes in the most unexpected places to the most unexpected people, that there is always a smaller plot beyond the systems of power that govern the world.

And that this plot, this plot in the end, is the only story that will ultimately matter. All of this, it really is nothing less than fantastical.

When I consider how entrenched the powers and structures of the world are, I sometimes feel like Narnia and Middle Earth are more believable than the birth of a Messiah who really does change everything.

Yet every Christmas, we are invited to put down our cynicism. We are asked to remember that newness has come and will come again.

Worst of all, or maybe best of all, we are asked to be open to how newness is breaking in all around of us and is waiting to be born through us.

[10 : 11] We are asked to follow Mary, not only in the birthing, but also in the treasuring and the pondering. Mary is able to hold sacred what seems impossible, to suspend her disbelief in some way and to continue contemplating how such things can be.

She keeps safe the unbelievable while remaining curious at the same time about exactly how all of this will come to be. Mary knows.

She knows what that editorialist church would put so well centuries later to the eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon. And nobody can conceive all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

So friends, the Lord of the universe comes to us. And the Lord of the universe has come to us in the most exposed way possible.

as a baby born to peasants in an occupied land. The birth of Jesus means that the commonwealth of God's flourishing has broken in.

[11 : 33] And in such an in-breaking, if such an in-breaking could happen, if it could happen then, it could happen again. In fact, the sacred story of the Christian faith tells us that it will happen again by us and apart from us.

That in-breaking, y'all, is indeed good news for all people. It means what all of us in this room need it to mean.

That as J.R.R. Tolkien put it, it means that there is joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief.

Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as your grief. joy beyond the walls of the world, this Christmas, may you experience the rebirth of enchantment.

May you know that to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

[12 : 52] it's easy to confuse cynicism with maturity. There's a particularly famous chapter in Christian scripture of St. Paul's writings where he says, when I was a child, I spoke as a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child, and when I became a man, I gave up childish ways.

This passage has been used by some Christians in some places as an excuse to embrace cynicism. If it was faith that eventually led to our hurt, then skepticism will certainly save us.

If we want to, as Paul says, no longer reason like a child, if we want to become grown up, that means we won't let ourselves get duped again.

Magic is dead, enchantment is for babies, and God with us is a fairy tale. Now, of course, it must be noted that this line about putting away childish things comes from a longer section on the characteristics of love.

Characteristics such as patience and kindness, a refusal to be jealous or boastful. Love, 1 Corinthians 13 says, it's not arrogant, it's not rude, and it definitely doesn't insist on getting its own way.

[14 : 22] It's not coercive, it's not irritable, it's not resentful. In fact, it doesn't keep a record of wrongs whatsoever. And, this is where it gets interesting, love puts up with anything.

It endures all things. Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. I don't know about you, but this love that St. Paul talks about sounds positively childish.

Unless, of course, Paul's point is the opposite of what maybe we've been told. Perhaps to put away childish things, to think and reason like a grown-up is to believe all things, to hope all things.

And it was, of course, Jesus who said, you must become like a child to enter the kingdom of God. And what better man to say that than a God who was born as a baby?

Who better to lead us into a re-enchantment of the world than a child, a naive, believes-all-sorts-of-things kind of child? Again, it's easy to confuse cynicism with maturity, skepticism with personal growth, but what would it look like for us to discover our naivete in order to behold the face of God?

[15 : 42] 19th century writer G.K. Chesterton describes God as eternally young. He says this, he says, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because God never gets tired of rising.

His routine, God's routine, might be due not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life. This thing, Chesterton writes, can be seen, for instance, in children when they find some game or joke that they especially enjoy.

A child kicks his legs rhythmically through excess, not absence of life. Because children have abounding vitality, because they are in spirit fierce and free, therefore they want things repeated and unchanged.

They always say, do it again, and the grown-up person does it again until they are nearly dead. For grown-up people are not strong enough to exalt in monotony. But perhaps God is strong enough to exalt in monotony.

It is possible that God says every morning, do it again to the sun, and every evening, do it again to the moon. It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike.

[16 : 54] It may be that God makes every daisy separately and has never gotten tired of making them. It may be that he has the eternal appetite of infancy.

For we have sinned and grown old, and our father is younger than we. There are a lot of reasons to embrace skepticism and cynicism and mistake them for growth and maturity.

Each of us in this room could name a person who we have loved and who we have lost. We could name a reason why the story of Christmas couldn't possibly be true while the church, how the church has failed us once again.

We could name a reason to plant down into a disenchantment with the world. There's lots of reasons to do that.

And when we do, we lose so much. We ignore the faith of those who suffer and yet hope all things, believe all things, as if we know better than those who have suffered and were naive enough to keep believing.

[18 : 10] I think it can be easy to imagine the birth of Jesus as well as his death was when God was at his least godly. But a divine baby who needs his butt wiped, who begs for a drink on his lynching tree, it takes an enchanted world to believe that God could be found there.

I know that I want that enchanted world again. And allowing death to have the last word is certainly a way to lose it. So this Christmas, may you be open to seeing the divine and the mundane again.

As one rabbi put it, burning bushes are everywhere. May this Christmas, may you be able to put away your childish ways of thinking and by doing so, once again, believe in magic.

By which I mean, Emmanuel, God with us. for the kids.

Wow. Wow. So that's how is dry because if you can't go and come from you know. What I mean, is that for a