

How Did That Red-Nosed Reindeer Get here?
December 18, 2011
Concord Presbyterian Church
Texts: Isaiah 35:1-10, Luke 1:26-38

Well, here we are. In six days we will gather to celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. We will also celebrate the rebirth of God's love within each one of us. Today four candles are lit. The wreath is there in front of us- a beautiful reminder of the season of Advent. For those of us lucky enough to hear the beautiful concert last night, we echo Handel's stirring "Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked straight and the rough places plain". We know Advent as a time of preparation, of expectation, of hope, of leaning forward to meet all the advents, all the comings of God in our lives.

Our scripture readings describe God's coming. From prophet and gospel writer we hear of the peace and glory to come when God's anointed one comes into our midst. The writer of Luke puts these words in the mouth of God's messenger Gabriel as the angel is telling Mary she will bear a son, "He will be great and will be called the son of the most High. Isaiah says, ""They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God." Even nature will greet God's coming. Isaiah's words are, "Waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert. The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped; the lame shall leap like a deer and the tongue of the speechless shall sing for joy." These are dramatic images surrounding Advent, the coming of God. So how, in the midst of our preparations to remember and celebrate the birth of Jesus of Nazareth- how in the hope and expectation of sensing those moments when we experience God's presence in our lives today- how, when we are pushing forward to the time when the reign of God is evident in all parts of this world- how, in such significant and dramatic moments did that red nosed reindeer get here? How did Rudolph get to be a part of the Advent season?

A piece of the answer lies in our inability to experience Advent as a season with its own power and message. We tend to get the Christmas season completely entangled with Advent. But even so, the question remains. How did flying reindeer and dancing snowflakes and cute snowmen with top hats get here? How did red and white stockings, elves, jingle bells, Santa Claus, the Grinch and peaceful scenes of snow covered countryside get mixed up with the celebration of the birth of a baby boy almost two thousand years ago in and country that gets no snow and for almost all of its history has had no peace.

Oh, I know all about blending the celebration of Jesus' birth with the festivities surrounding the winter solstice. But why do we keep adding more and more fanciful characters and qualities to the preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus? That question came into particularly sharp focus many years ago when my grandchildren were together and were singing what they called "Christmas songs". The older ones were struggling to teach the younger ones the verse of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Their problem was they could not remember the names of the other reindeer. Unable to stop myself I burst into the room singing with great gusto if not with any similarity to the tune as written. "There's Dasher and Dancer and Prancer and Vixen, Comet and Cupid and Donner and Blitzen. But do you recall the most famous reindeer of all..." Anyhow after we finished the song, I was really embarrassed, not merely because I cannot carry a tune or because I love sitting with kids who do not care whether or not you have the tune right. I was embarrassed because I love singing about reindeer that fly and play and are mean to a reindeer that isn't just like them. And I always cheer inwardly that Rudolph gets the last laugh when he saves the day by guiding Santa on his rounds. It embarrasses me that I, an ordained minister of word and sacrament, love all the trappings that have become attached to this

season. Over the years I have heard the passionate pleas to put Christ back into Christmas. I even have joined in decrying the rampant commercialism. So I feel a little guilty that I enjoy all the fol-di-rol. I blush to confess that I even like the canned music that I hear in stores. I have both versions of Miricle on 34th Street on DVD. I have already watched Elf with Will Farrel and Bob Newhart 3 times this season. But the question remains. Whether hated or guiltily enjoyed, why have all these things been wrapped around and woven through the story of the birth of a baby that our faith claims is God in our midst?

That is it I think. We add more and more fantastic stories and traditions and myths because stated baldly, the occurrence is so amazing that it is beyond our ability to take it in. A baby is born. A man teaches and preaches and heals. This baby, or more accurately the man that this baby becomes, this man lives out God's love for the world. With this birth and this life and this death and this resurrection, God's reign is begun. What a fantastically radical claim. This baby is Immanuel, God with us, God in the midst of us. How do we understand that? I suspect that we do not understand it because God with us is not something to understand. It is something to experience.

The gospel writers wrote of a birth surrounded by miraculous happenings, only after experiencing the difference that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus had made. Just so, God's presence in our lives in a myriad of ways makes us bold to claim that God lived among us in a unique way. At a particular time and place when Quirinius was governor of Syria, in a small town of no importance, a child was born. And beyond anyone's power to explain, this helpless squalling infant, this baby who looks and acts like every other baby is our loving creator.

Our view of what is real and true is altered. Year after year the ancient tale of what happened and what happens is told, raw, preposterous and holy and year after year the world in some measure stops to listen. We prepare each year for it to happen again. We long for the unbelievable to be believed- no we long for more than that. We long for the miracle to become real. We sing and we speak of God's coming in love amongst us. And we make up strangely fantastic stories. We cannot grasp the most amazing story we will ever hear, the most amazing experience we will ever have, the most wonderful gift we will ever receive. God with us. And so we speak of dancing snowmen, flying reindeer, talking animals and elves.

A child is born and nothing afterward is the same. God with us. What keeps the wild hope of Christmas alive year after year, in a world notorious for dashing all hopes. What keeps us adding more and more myths and legends to the celebration of the birth of Jesus? It is the wildly fantastic claim, the claim that our faith knows as absolutely true, that the child who was born that day may be born again in us and nothing will be the same. A birth of grace and truth can take place in us- more miraculous than any story that we might tell. Watch and wait. This is the miracle. God's extravagant love may be born again in us. ALLELUIA AMEN