

Christmas Eve Reflection

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Rev. Bill Eichhorn



painting by Crista Forest

Christmas Poem

Mary Oliver

Says a country legend told every year:

Go to the barn on Christmas Eve and see
what the creatures do as that long night tips over.

Down on their knees they will go, the fire
of an old memory whistling through their minds!

So I went. Wrapped to my eyes against the cold
I creaked back the barn door and peered in.

From town the church bells spilled their midnight music, and the beasts listened –
yet they lay in their stalls like stone.

Oh the heretics!

Not to remember Bethlehem,
or the star as bright as a sun,
or the child born on a bed of straw!

To know only of the dissolving Now!

Still they drowsed on –

citizens of the pure, the physical world, they loomed in the dark: powerful
of body, peaceful of mind,
innocent of history.

Brothers! I whispered. *It is Christmas!*

*And you are no heretics, but a miracle, immaculate still as when you thundered forth on the morning
of creation!*

As for Bethlehem, that blazing star
still sailed the dark, but only looked for me.

Caught in its light, listening again to its story,

I curled against some sleepy beast, who nuzzled
my hair as though I were a child, and warmed me
the best it could all night.

Mary Oliver reminds us that Christmas is about remembering past Christmases. For some of us, we heard those church bells spilling their midnight music across the snow into the crisp winter air. When I was six years old, I remember my father pulling a sled carrying my sister and me to Christmas Eve service. The red runners made a silent swish in the new-fallen snow. The bells in the church tower did indeed spill their music into the night, inviting us and others into a candlelit sanctuary that seemed utterly magic to me.

Yes, Christmas brings to mind memories of other times and places. Some of those memories are painful because not all the loved ones we had Christmas with then are with us today. For some of us, family dynamics during the holidays were difficult, and may still be, so there is this mixture of painful memories, while we try to create new experiences and memories that are more joyful. Let us hold our Christmas memories tenderly tonight. Let the Light born this night illuminate our Christmas experiences, as well as our memories.

Mary Oliver's poem invites us, I believe, to rekindle our faith in the future. She goes to the barn with the hope of finding the animals caught up in the mystery of a holy birth, but she finds the cattle are not lowing while the baby sleeps. Instead, they lay in their stalls like stones. Oh, what disappointment. The old legend isn't true. But notice, those cattle are "powerful of body, peaceful of mind, innocent of history." Then she gets it. The animals are not part of a story, they are real. They are her flesh and blood brothers, her sisters, her companions. She is not alone in this world. She will curl up beside them and take in their warmth.

My friends, we can look to the future knowing we are accompanied in the journey by real people who are light bearers, people who will respect and support that spark of the divine in us, that light that lives in all of us. We do for one another what the cattle did for the poet. We provide a safe, warm place for one another when we face the cold and need the warmth of family, friends, community. Let the Light born again tonight rekindle our faith in the future.

The poem invites us to remember, to renew our faith in the future, and to celebrate the present. When our CCC weekly discussion group, Stone Soup, reflected on the Oliver poem this past week, one person said, "To know only the dissolving now, what an example to snuggle up to." Yes. How fulfilling and healthy it would be to live fully in the present, without being anxious about or brooding over the past and its regrets. How creative we could be with our imaginations, how deep we could explore the love-longings God has woven into our spiritual DNA, if we could learn to live in "the dissolving now".

Having listened once again to the story of how the Light was born in Bethlehem, know, as the poet tells us, that there is a star looking for each one of us, a star inviting us to the newness being birthed in the "dissolving now" of this Christmas moment.

Let us pray...