

Sermon: Star of Wonder
Text: Luke 2
Date: December 23, 2018
Context: WWPCCC
Fourth Sunday in Advent
By: Rev. Steve Runholt

*So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph,
and the child lying in the manger.*

Luke 2:16

Ten years ago this month, Pat Tuttle -- a good friend to many of us here today -- shared an ongoing story on Facebook that took my experience of Advent to a level it had never been before.

It was a story centered around a little baby. A story whose specifics seemed so improbable as to border on the miraculous. A story driven by enormously high stakes, with an ending that was impossible to predict.

Which is to say, a story not unlike the first Christmas story.

Which is a little ironic. Because, fundamentally, this was not a theological story.

Rather it's a story about science, about medicine and technology that are so advanced that until only a few decades ago anyone hearing the story would have considered it to be so outlandish, so fanciful, that it could not possibly be true.

And yet it happened.

Some of you will likely remember this story. It started when Pat's daughter-in-law, Carrie, took her infant son, Heath, in for his Well Baby checkup.

That was the moment when everything changed, the moment when a routine doctor's visit morphed like a nightmare and became a dramatic story, when the stakes for Carrie and her infant so went from negligible to life-or-death.

Because it turned out that despite little Heath's vibrant and happy disposition, he was not just not well, he was gravely ill.

A battery of tests showed that he had restrictive cardiomyopathy, a rare condition in which the heart's ventricles become rigid, and thus inhibit the heart's ability to pump blood.

And to his parent's bottomless dismay, Heath had an advanced case, so much so that his only hope for survival was to receive a heart transplant.

So, doctors put little Heath on the transplant list, did some preparatory work on him, then sent him home.

Heath's daddy, Chris, had just been called as the new pastor of the Westminster Presbyterian Church in Durham.

His mom, Carrie, also happens to be a Presbyterian minister, and his granddaddy, Bob, had just preached at Laura Becker's ordination a few weeks earlier. The service was right here in this sanctuary. (Laura is a former member here and now she, too, is a Presbyterian minister.)

If you were here that day, you may remember that Bob's sermon was centered on the question, *Is the Lord with us or not?* Is Christ Emmanuel or not?

Well, they were about to find out. This whole faithful family settled in for an Advent season unlike any they'd known in their entire lives, as they waited not for the arrival of Christmas but for a new heart for Heath.

Did I mention there were animals involved? At least one, anyway. When Heath got sick, the Tuttle's golden retriever took up residence under Heath's crib, and guarded that precious little baby like he was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

Doctors felt that Heath had some time before his condition became critical, before his ventricles hardened to the danger point. But while they were waiting for the new heart, little Heath coded not once but twice.

As providence would have it, both times he was in range of emergency medical facilities and doctors were able to save him.

But it was clear Heath's condition was deteriorating more quickly than his doctors expected. So he was admitted to the Pediatric Intensive Care unit at Duke University Medical Center, where he was put on a respirator and moved up on the transplant waiting list.

The medical staff reluctantly informed the Tuttle family that once a baby is on a respirator, the ideal window for pediatric transplants is a mere 10 days. After that, those little bodies start to shut down from the stress of it all.

So Carrie and Chris had to face a question no parent ever wants to face, a question to which not even a family full of ministers has an adequate answer – if no heart could be found, then after those 10 days, what then?

The members of the Tuttle family are life-long practitioners of Advent hope and Christmas faith, but even so this situation required Heath's mom and dad, and his grandparents, to dial up their hope and their faith to industrial strength.

The days ticked by. One, two, three . . . with no heart to be found . . . then eight, then nine, then, finally, the tenth day arrived. And that question -- what would happen if no heart *was* found -- began to be a real possibility.

And then, that very evening, like a star bursting with wondrous light in the night sky, the phone rang. It was a hospital in distant state. "We have a heart," the doctors there said.

"We're on our way," the doctors in Durham replied.

And off they went on a chartered jet, flying into the night on a journey every bit as sacred to the Tuttle family as the journey of those magi from long ago.

As soon as they arrived, the doctors quickly ran a quick battery of tests, to determine compatibility. And praise be! It was a match! Now, in these conditions you have a limited window of cardiac viability, before the heart can no longer be used.

So Heath's team immediately got back on that plane and hightailed it back to Durham at top speed.

Around 4:00 a.m. on Sunday, December 14th – the third Sunday in Advent, the Sunday of Joy – nurses wheeled baby Heath into the operating room to receive his new heart. Surgery was expected to take six hours.

About three hours in, a nurse briefly popped into the waiting room. *Heath's heart is out*, she announced--a phrase that must have hit his mom and dad like a meteorite, knocking them senseless. But *he's on life support and he's doing okay*.

Pat told me that she spent the waning hours of that harrowing night singing the 23rd Psalm and *O Holy Night* quietly to herself, her own heart close to stopping.

Then, around 8:45 that morning, the doctors came in to share good news of great joy—Heath had a new heart, and it was pumping all on its own.

Now some folks might say that this story is not about a miracle. After all, science made the whole thing possible. And I agree. Wholeheartedly.

I think we should recite liturgy giving thanks for pediatric cardiologists and jet pilots, and we should sing anthems giving voice to our gratitude for EKG machines and anesthesia, and for the antibiotics and anti-rejection medicines that kept little Heath alive during the most vulnerable period of his young and priceless life.

But if you ask the Tuttles, they'll tell you they saw the fingerprints of the Divine One all over this story, starting with the timing of that “Well Baby” checkup that ultimately saved young Heath's life, and continuing right through to the end, to this one final moment.

After they got the news that baby Heath had a new heart, Pat was finally released from this exhausting vigil. So she stole the chance to raise her bowed head and look outside.

A startling image greeted her. For there, across the quad, stood the glorious gothic tower of Duke University Chapel, glowing in the morning light like a

beam of starlight, shining down near the high-tech cradle in the cardiac ICU where her grandbaby lay.

Star or wonder, star of night, guide us to thy perfect light.

I will never forget how powerfully this story affected my experience of Advent that year, how I found myself waging hope with the Tuttle family; praying for peace for members of Pat's family; most of whom I did not know; how I shared in their joy over the wondrously good news of Heath's outcome.

Or how I was stunned into reverent silence by the love of a mother who made the decision to donate her little loved one's heart so that another baby might live, a Christmas gift whose value is so far beyond calculation you might think it cannot be measured.

Except it can be measured, in the number of steps Heath, now a healthy ten-year-old boy, runs and skips and walks very single day.

And so it was that ten years later, Pat once again put up FB post that caused me to stop and ponder the miracle of Christmas in a new way.

This time it was not an ongoing story, filled with nail-biting tension and heart-stopping, and heart-beating, drama.

It was a simple painting of a brand new family, the Holy Family in this case. But it, too, told its own story.

In the painting, Mary and Joseph are together with their newborn baby in the stable where the child was born. They are alone. The shepherds who feature so prominently and wonderfully, and even comically, in Luke's gospel are surely on their way and will soon arrive.

I think it's also likely that at that very moment the magi have just pulled into Jerusalem, tied up their camels, and are asking around the tavern where they've stopped to refuel if anyone knows where the Messiah has been born.

So for now, there they sit, Mary and Joseph, alone with their newborn child. His daddy is perched on a stool beside the crib. It's clear from the look on Joseph's face that he is still pondering how this could be.

You can almost read the thoughts running through his head: *I had no say in this, no involvement at all in what happened to Mary, and now my life has changed forever. How did this happen to me?*

As for the baby Jesus, yes, a beatific glow is emanating from his tiny little head.

But it's Mary that really caught my eye. She is clearly exhausted. Which is not surprising. Because here's the truth that none of the Gospel writers thought to mention, probably because they are all men.

It cost Mary to give birth to that tiny little child.

Yes, her cooperation was essential to this story. But it cost her. It asked her to labor even when it was hard. Especially when it was hard. To push through searing pain, to take deep, gulping, desperate breaths when it felt like she could not take even more more. And still she pushed. She breathed. She cried. She bled.

It's not in the text but do you know why that matters? Why these details would almost certainly have been included in this story if a woman had written it?

Because sometimes that's what love requires. Because sometimes that's what it takes to give birth to God's presence in the world.

From the moment this Advent season started I have felt deep gratitude to our kids for acting out various parts of this story for us.

And to Kristin and Lisa and Grace and, of course, Vivian, who helped prepare the children to lead our worship service in this wonderful way.

Seeing them, I think we've all been reminded that the Christmas story is a perfect tale for children, the shepherds and the magi and the star and the angels and the animals all ideally suited to their innocent world and wondrous imaginations.

But this painting brought home to me, again, that the story of Christ's birth is not just a tale fit for children.

It's a story for a world just like ours, for people just like us. A story where tsunamis crash onto beaches with no warning, and with deadly effect, just days before Christmas.

A world where we sometimes find ourselves wondering what has happened to us, how it can be that events over which we have no control break in on our lives and change them forever.

How the effort we invest to embody God's love in this world often leaves feeling exhausted, our hearts sometimes bleeding with the effort.

Which is why it is so important to remember that this is not, fundamentally, a scientific story. It's not about biology.

This is a theological story. And the great good news of the story is this: Christ will be born into our world, and right into the center of our lives, again and again and again.

So the answer to Bob Tuttle's question from ten years ago is the same today as it was then:

Is the Lord with us or not? Is Christ Emmanuel or not?

Yes. Yes, this Christ child is with us and for us, now and always.

Thanks be to God. And merry Christmas!