

Christmas Eve 2008

Childhood is rarely filled solely with lollipops and love. Often, there are scars and wounds as well, sometimes surface and sometimes deep. Luckily, I personally was not born in a stable even if I was in Oklahoma, and my family did not have to flee from Herod's wrath like someone we need not name. And yet, there were times of great fear in my own childhood. Specifically, I refer to the scabby scars and injuries which live on in my heart as the result of one particular scourge. I am not speaking about big, brutish bullies, though they did exist, or even slimy snakes, though they also made an appearance. I speak... about children's television. In my youth, I could handle the likes of *Tom and Jerry*. I could easily enjoy the Saturday morning *Smurfs* and their trials with Gargamel. I was frankly bored with that overstuffed big-birded, snuffaluffagussed *Sesame Street*.

But whenever the few minor chords of the Scooby Doo, Hanna Barbara cartoon theme song rang out, I knew that there would be trouble. You see, I adored the *Scooby Doo Show*. More accurately, I was obsessed. Countless hours of my youth were squandered watching the vapid Daphne, the scarf-wearing Fred, the knee-socked Velma, and scardy-cat Shaggy, not to mention their mutt dog Scooby Doo. The group, if you recall, journeyed around in their Magic Mystery Machine Van to fight crime and monsters and ghosts. These monsters and ghosts, you see, were the problem. In each episode, Daphne, Fred, Velma, Shaggy, and Scoob would be chased and followed ad nauseum by said monsters and ghosts. The whole thing was set to minor keyed house-haunting music. And when I would go to bed at night after watching that show, instead of sugar-plums, that music and those terrifying images would dance in my head.

My sensitive, creative mind would begin to work overtime. I would imagine those ghosts and beasts under my bed and in my closet. I stand before you on this Christmas Eve and tell you that one of the wounds of my childhood was Scooby Doo. *The Scooby Doo Show* gave me horrible night-terrors. Every night, confronted with such horror, I would run and sleep in my parents' bed.

My parents tried everything to help me combat my nightmares. The obvious was attempted. I was not allowed to watch the show. But I found my ways. My parents also tried a system of rewards. If I could make it through the night without screaming and running to my parents' room, there would be toys in my future. Nothing worked. Exasperated, and out of sleep, my parents eventually took me to a professional to address my animated anxieties. And the good doctor had one suggestion: watch Scooby Doo. Watch scary movies. Face them. Except, the therapist told me to turn down the volume. "Don't listen to the scary music," he said. Listen to something else, something comedic even, and see what happens.

Feeling vindicated, I did just that. I turned down the volume and watched. And oddly enough, without those macabre calibrations ringing in my ears, things began to look differently. The images were the same, but the music changed how I processed them. The show began to seem humorous, not scary. The monsters no longer held much fear for me. And as a result, I learned to sleep in my own bed. I could confront my fears. When something is scary, I learned to change the background music.

And on this holiest of nights, I want to say that Christmas, the birth of Jesus the Christ, offers us what that doctor offered me: new background music. For it is not that our God is in the business of changing what we see in the world but rather how we see it. For God does not make the monsters and the ghosts of our lives disappear, but the presence of Jesus changes how we react to them.

Jesus, after all, came into a Scooby Doo theme song world of fear. There were fearful creatures afoot all around him. The story begins, "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." In other words, Caesar was the background music for Jesus' time. Caesar controlled the Judean territory. He decided who counted. Even Jerusalem and the Temple were ultimately under his authority. And Caesar's minor-keyed Madeoff-styled greed for power and money affected everything, even the people's very idea of God. Even God seemed like Caesar: ruthlessly searching for control and punishing and smiting enemies. Enter Jesus. Jesus, the true son of God is birthed into this world as a helpless, vulnerable child, completely unlike Caesar. Mary, "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." Jesus mutes our previous vision of God. The people thought God would enter the world on a throne with pillars of fire. Instead, his only throne is the lap of his Mother, and not only does he not have a kingly palace, there isn't even a light on for him at the Bethlehem Motel 6.

And in this moment, everything is redefined. God, by being the child of an teenage, barely wed mother and a Father without a genetic claim, is revealed to be the God of the unlikely, the outcast, the dispossessed, and the afraid. God is shown to be the God of those who fail, and those for whom there is no room at the inn. God is not only the God of the Caesar's of the world, God is the God of everyone: Obama, McCain, Democrat, Republican, Osama Bin Laden, gays and lesbians and the pope, Herod, those without homes in Mississippi, orphans with HIV/AIDS in Africa. God is the God of you and me, and of everyone we love, and everyone we hate. Because Jesus was born in a stable in Bethlehem, we can look at no one and no thing without finding God. And that is our new soundtrack. We cannot be separated from the love of God. Even when a situation looks dire, drastic, and without possibility of success, even in barns with animals, God is there.

Many have claimed that Jesus was a weak solution to our world's problems. Many have preferred a more Caesar-like model. But "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears; I come to bury Caesar, not to praise him." (Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*). God, instead, looked at our world and creation and saw that the only way to change our nightmares into dreams was to help us change how we see them. And he empowered us to face the difficulties of our lives and the world. He told us, like that therapist, to confront them. And to do so with a new soundtrack in which we are never separated from the love of God. And so now, the music is changed. The cold, silent night, becomes a holy night. A cold stable in Bethlehem is found to be a palace fit for God. And instead of Caesar-like Glory, the glory of God is found in being vulnerable with one another, serving and loving one another, and in welcoming God into our world and hearts. In short, we need not live in fear. We need not react to the world and one another in anything but love.

I know that for many of us, this is a difficult Christmas. In the past year, relationships and bank accounts have been broken. Jobs have been lost. The fear of job loss and uncertainty is rampant. We certainly feel the effects here at St. A's. (And we have had to say goodbye to several friends here, like Marge and Jack). And yet, we still gather to sing out in faith. We trust that the music God is playing is not ominous but inviting and never-ending. And we attempt in our own small way to invite the world to listen to this song, this melody of a God who only loves and desires that we love one another.

And so, my friends, turn down the volume of fear. Trust that God is with us, and turn up the volume of joy and faith and peace and God. And say and sing, along with the background music, and the music of the angels in Bethlehem. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace". Merry Christmas.