

God, who set the stars in the sky and told stories of his great love to Abraham through them. God, who gave us bodies and placed us in communities to live and love together so that his story may be made known, would you open our hearts and minds to the wonder of your story in us.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in your sight, O Lord our strength and redeemer. Amen.

Currently I am taking a class on the history of the modern church. We have to learn about the enlightenment and the various reforms and awakenings, the effects of modernism and post modernism on the church. It's all very interesting and informative, and sometimes rather bewildering. But I suppose we are all in the same shoes whether you are studying modern church history or just living in this current moment, it's confusing navigating these times, considering what paths we have traveled to get to this very perplexing moment in our world today.

Last week as we discussed modernism and post modernism our professor used the concept of story to help describe each one. Modernism believes that there is an epilogue, he said, there is a wrap up to the great story of our life here on earth, of our purpose, individually, corporately, cosmically. Post modernism, on the other hand, leaves the story open-ended – perhaps there is no epilogue- perhaps a comprehensive wrap up isn't necessary?

Our scriptures this morning seem to embrace story... Daniel talks about a time – **that time** – when Michael, the great prince, will arise. The Psalmist also confesses a hope in God’s goodness that takes the form of counsel and instruction as he journeys through life. It’s interesting to me that it is Jesus who describes an insecure time, a time when what is familiar and a source of strength – the large buildings of the Temple – would be toppled. But this is the beginning of birth pangs, he says, the sign of something new coming forth and his most urgent instruction was that those who desired to follow him would not be led astray – that they would be able to recognize him.

What would keep us from recognizing Jesus? Perhaps one answer might be that we become too familiar with the story of God? Maybe so much so that we have lost the essence of the story? There is no epilogue, not because its open ended but because we have forgotten the plot. Perhaps in some way this faith that we practice here every Sunday, has become an abstraction in the midst of so much else that bewilders us? Perhaps it becomes a set of ideas we consent to rather than a story we partake in?

In a book called *A Bridge to Wonder*, Cecilia Gonzalez-Andrieu states that a “prophetically charged work of art... can bring what has become an abstraction back to life.... Prophetic insight depends on our willingness to be open to an

encounter that could knock us off our feet.” (40) For the past 15 years, right around this time of year, I have had the joy of being a part of one of those works of art. And this year I am so excited that you all can be a part of it too. Ahavah is a gift because it reacquaints us, makes alive to us once again, connects us to the wonder of the story that Jesus opened for us – God **with** Us – Immanuel.

Over the past 15 years Elisa, and the dancers of Ekklesia have been on a journey, one on which they have been learning about story. It’s a journey that hasn’t found a definitive end – each year Ahavah changes –

Initially, Ahavah was offered as the Christian alternative to the Nutcracker, complete with an elaborate opening party scene- full of glitz and holiday cheer. Beginning in the late summer of every year, a group of dancers, young and old, would gather and study the Christmas story and work together to embody it on stage. *Ahavah* is a wonderful way for us, as a community of dancers “to penetrate the biblical text in a fresh way.” (Levy, 150) We have to let our emotions and hearts be touched by the Biblical stories in order to perform them well. (Levy, 155) “We learn best when we are fully engaged, body and spirit.” (Levy, 173) Truly Ahavah is an effective and affective carrier of our religious tradition. (Garcia-Andrieu, 137) And it brings the story of Immanuel, God with Us, to life.

Over the years, however, we recognized that embodying this story of Immanuel wasn't something we could simply leave on the stage, or even in the theater with the audience. We wanted our art to reach into our wider community and to do that we realized that we needed to relook at the story. If we wanted our production to reengage us with the Kingdom of God, we needed to let our imagination look beyond our understanding of the story we were all too familiar with – a story we may have let become an abstraction. Kierkegaard once said “that God uses the imagination to draw us toward reality, leading us far and deep into human existence. And when the imagination has helped us to go as far as we can, that is just where true reality begins.” (Levy, 159) It was once we allowed the creative process to move beyond the form that we knew, that *Ahavah* became a vehicle that could “estrangle and complicate reality so we can see anew what had become common place.” (Garcia-Andrieu,115)

We began to let the artistic, balletic expression of the familiar Christmas story be a theological exploration. One theologian put it beautifully “To do theology (or create a ballet) is to write a love letter to that God I believe in, to that community I belong to, and to that church of which I am a part. A love that is no stranger to what is perplexing and even to what is bitter, but (a love) that is more than anything a source of profound joy.” (Gustavo Gutierrez, *La Densidad de Presente*,

70). We began to ask questions of ourselves and of the Christmas story – how does the gift of Jesus practically apply to our community, through us, through the church? To whom would the angels have delivered their message of great joy in our community? we realized that we could connect our telling of the Christmas story to the very concrete needs of our community. Artistically we changed the setting of the show from a lavish Christmas party to a cold bustling holiday street scene, complete with harried last-minute shoppers, fighting couples, and people struggling with addiction or who had no place to call home. The audience could connect the story of Immanuel with these familiar characters of our lives today – because “(c)ompassion and sympathy become twin suspension lines of a religious aesthetic bridge that unites the human and the sacred.” (Garcia-Rivera, 13) Into this setting *Ahavah* now opens the Biblical narrative of a creator and lover of his creation and audience members connect Jesus’ birth, life and death with the life they experience. Christmas can be seen anew. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, once said, “(t)hrough Art we are sometimes sent – indistinctly, briefly, - revelations not to be achieved by rational thought.” (Johnston, 181) Because this story is told with movement and music *Ahavah* can create a virtual experience,” one that “can connect us with passions, feelings, fears and hopes in ways other things cannot.” (Johnson, 17) *Ahavah* both carries the tradition of the story of Christ’s birth even

as it estranges it and complicates it so that we can see the incarnation of Jesus among us anew, Perhaps Christ becomes present to the audience in a way that they had not experienced him before? Perhaps, the ongoing, open ended story of Immanuel – God with us – becomes one we can touch and feel and experience and take with us as we continue on this oftentimes-bewildering journey.

Daniel wrote, “at that time Michael, the great prince will arise.” The Psalmist writes that God will show them the path of life. And Jesus tells us that the story will continue. This is the story we are invited to participate in. This is the story – God with us – that was announced even to those who seemed so far from the plot – even the magi who had been looking for the story.... Amen.

#### Works Cited

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