

Going deeper in the same place.

Richard Rohr has just put out a video called “Going Deep in One Place” where he says you don’t have to change religions to move into a deeper understanding, beyond the symbols and metaphors. Christmas *is* a season of symbols and metaphors but this year is different. I’ll explain.

First let’s talk about metaphors and symbols and then we’ll look at going deeper in one place.

As a spiritual director I have seen that once a person moves to that inner experience, that union with the love of God, they move beyond a simple symbol system. Or perhaps I should say they move to a deeper engagement with symbols that lends a depth and meaning to ritual.

For example, when I was training pastors, I try to instil in them that dressing the altar is an act of worship and should be done accordingly. You are laying a table for God – not rushing around organising tea rosters.

Rohr says all religions start with the external – where else can you start? It may be rituals like bowing to the cross, crossing oneself or fasting. It also starts in metaphors because how else to describe the Kingdom of God? Jesus says, It’s like....a mustard seed, a vine, a landowner
It’s like, it’s like.....

But we don’t teach anything in early religious education about dealing in symbols and metaphors. We tell stories about Jonah and the whale and Joseph and his coat of many colours. We don’t parse the stories or ask them what they mean.

How can children distinguish between Gladly the cross-eyed bear and ladders coming down from heaven.

Rachel Held Evans saw the Bible as a fantastic story book filled with dragons, escapology and walking on water. Then she grew up...and what else could she do but leave the fantastic stories behind. She had to fall in love with scripture all over again but from a grown-up's view. Rev Rex Hunt wrote a whole book called "Why weren't we told?" about the simplified myths that we don't question.

So what's the problem? My role as a chaplain was to walk with people mostly of no church. Why were they of no church? Because no one ever explained to them that we don't actually eat the body and drink the blood of Christ. That even for us who deeply believe we are sharing a meal with God – we know the difference between grape juice and blood. Outsiders react to our symbols and rituals. They think us naive and are often repelled. Though they may be blinded by the myths - I discovered; it doesn't mean they are not steeped in faith.

The problem is we wind up protecting and worshipping the metaphors. We become defensive over the wrong things.

Take American flag. It is a symbol of loyalty, justice and democracy. They have laws protecting the flag but the symbol has become a substitute for true loyalty and the worshipping of it has allowed the symbol to be appropriated by right wing groups who do not hold the same values. It has become a quasi-god in itself. We take the symbols and make them into something else.

I am willing to bet the person with the most Christmas gear (earrings that light up) bangles, Rudolf horns and Santa shirts is not here in church today. They love the symbols of Christmas – not Christmas. Coca-Cola promoted the Santa we see today in 1931 from a *Harper's Bazaar* illustration by Tom Nast. Nast did the first red Santa in 1823. Until then, Santa/St Nick was a Bishop with a bishop's staff. He was not fat. He was always shown as dressed in Bishop's robes of green, gold or monk's brown and wearing a Bishop's mitre. No red. No reindeer. They arrived in 1821.

Lavish weddings are seen by the couple as a symbol of love – it's not love.... Except perhaps from the parent who pays for it. We've come to worship the wedding not the marriage.

As I balked at Hail Mary's, my very good Catholic friend said, you know it's just a meditation tool, don't you? Well, no one told me! I was struggling with blessing another woman's womb but she was saying, it's a ritual, a tool to allow you to go deeper.

I don't want to sound like the grinch but the Christmas story is just that – a story- rich in metaphors and symbols, some of which are in Scripture most of which like Santa and the nativity were added later. Wherever we grew up, the pageants are a mixture of folk stories, traditions, local add-ons and creative thinking. Our task is to worship God – not Christmas. To celebrate the birth of a whole new era, spiritual shift that changed the world.

It's not the manger that counts or whether it was a barn or a stable – it's that God chose to enter the world in a humble place to ordinary people. It's not the star that the shepherd saw – it's that in the book of Jewish laws, shepherds are clumped with robbers. They are unclean, outcasts – living beyond the walls and they are witnesses and welcomed at God's side. The first witnesses were the poor and outcast.

It's not the presents, it that strangers were drawn in awe and as protectors. It was a symbol of people banding together to help and protect and to love. And this brings us to COVID 2020 (as you knew it would).

We have been stuck in one place for a long time and there is a part of me that thinks that's a good thing. We have not been travelling, which has given us an opportunity to go deeper. Every time we are disappointed with another outbreak lockdown, I hear the cries of communities and when interviewed most say, "we'll do whatever we have to do to keep people safe". These are the 3 wisemen multiplied.

Because of separation, we are not running around. Most of us are not taken up with ginormous lunches and dinners that sap our energy. Lock down means we

have not been blinded by commercial blitzes. We're thinking simple – keep it simple. Instead of hacking our way through a forest of insincere symbols and metaphors, I think this year, we are closer to Christmas.

Richard Rohr does not ask people to abandon their faith traditions in order to go deeper – he simply says we need to go deeper into our symbols to discover their real meaning and purpose.

What is the meaning of Christmas?

Hope for the future – looking beyond the day

Peace for the world – a genuine prayer to end conflict

Making a place for joy, genuine, illustrious, spontaneous joy – to jumpstart our senses

And most of all,

Love.

Love for each other. Love for the birth of Jesus who changed the world. Love of God,

love from God,

Love and gratefulness for our families.

This Christmas let's look at the symbols, stories and metaphors as if we were from an alien planet. Planet lock down. What's in a tree? Why a baby? Why them? Why me? Mary could not imagine the life about to unfold – neither can we.

We save the love candle for last because it is the most important. God gave us the capacity to love immensely – even when it hurts.

I pray, Hail Mary, Mother of God – take me deeper into the real expression of all this faith. You show me what commitment looks like. Teach me the undying trust and love you have for God. Amen

Going Deeper for Wyndham

All of the readings have been leading up to this point. Isaiah's prophecies, John the Baptist – make way...

Thursday's scripture reading was Matthew 1:1-17 ... that long list of generations everyone hates to read out loud in church. It makes the line clear from Abraham, through David across 14 generations, the diaspora, another 14 generations to Jesus. The list includes the exceptional and a few of the less glorious ancestors. Why? The Gospel is making a direct link from the beginning of the Jewish story to Jesus. Matthew is establishing the credentials to later prove that Jesus was the Messiah, the one who would come. To make the link that Moses led the people out of slavery and Jesus will lead them to a different freedom.

In modern times, it means more than that. We are the product of our ancestors, whether we knew them or not. Their genes are our genes and their life experiences live on in us. During lock down, a lot of people have been exploring their family's history. For some, there is a driving need to understand their origins better.

Lock down meant spending time with ourselves. Not always an easy task. It has been one of the burdens and the blessings that people are spending time getting to know themselves and where they come from. That is one way of going deeper in the same place.

(Did you know that most Maoris can recite their lineage back over 27 generations to which canoe their family arrived in 600 years ago?)

Matthew too, thought it was important for us to know that Jesus didn't just pop up over the horizon. Matthew wanted to establish Jesus' ancestors were fully human; that they were sometimes flawed; that the house of David lived on in Jesus. Matthew is verifying Jesus' human origins to ground him in our society first, before declaring Him the son of God.

Mary is troubled by what the angel tells her – who wouldn't be? But her trust in God overcomes her fear.

As we listen to Mary's song – you can hear the love and joy dancing in her words.

Mary's story is one of enduring love and lasting faith.

That is the story of Christmas.

I don't want to sound like the grinch but in modern times we confuse the symbols for the story. Much of society have come to worship the jingle-jangle, not the meaning. This is a story- rich in metaphors and symbols, some of which are in Scripture, most of which, like Santa and the nativity, were added later. Wherever we grew up, the pageants are a mixture of folk stories, traditions, local add-ons and creative thinking. Our family or community's Yuletide traditions are import as they link us to generations past but they are not Christmas.

Our task is to worship God – not ornaments or puddings. To celebrate the birth of a whole new era, a spiritual shift that changed the world.

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The new symbols, the candy cane, the silver bells have become part of the DNA in Christmas. Our job is to work out what it really means. What is

important and what is just tinsel. This Christmas, like no other, we have a chance to take it deeper *because* we are in one place.

We save the love candle for last because it is the most important. God gave us the capacity to love immensely – even when it hurts.

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Love and gratefulness for our families.

Love for those not with us but in our hearts.

I can hear an auntie saying, “this is it, love, you, me and God.”