

“We Are There”

Every year there is usually a touring company of some popular Broadway show that passes through central Ohio and performs at one of the marquee theaters in downtown Columbus. One of the shows that creates excitement when it comes to town is the musical, “Wicked.” Now, let me quickly say that just speaking the word “wicked” on Christmas Eve feels wildly out of place, but bear with me as I share why this comes to mind. A number of years ago, I saw a performance of the production, “Wicked,” at the Ohio Theater. I had a really good seat. It was in the main section and toward the center, where I could see and hear everything beautifully. There may not be a bad seat in the house but when you are front and center you are easily pulled into the drama. For those who may not know, the storyline of “Wicked” is a spinoff of the story of The Wizard of Oz, with a focus on how the wicked Witch of the West came to be. The music of the show is delightful and the first half ends with a huge theatrical number called “Defying Gravity,” a solo by the female star. As this song was happening, and the orchestra and the staging grew with increasing crescendo, I became aware of the woman sitting next to me. She wasn’t just enjoying the show, she was transported by it. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see that she had moved to the edge of her seat. She was clutching her hands to her heart, and she was swaying with delight, mouthing every word of the song. Now, I, too, was captivated by the power of both the music and the moment, but I was also aware of the sideshow that was taking place in the seat next to me. As the song soared to its conclusion and the curtain dropped, ushering us into the intermission, I turned to the woman beside me, still fascinated by the way in which she had become so much a part of what was happening on stage. She saw me turn toward her, and she looked at me and said, “That is my daughter. That’s my daughter up there.” There were tears in her eyes and her whole self was nearly exploding with pride and joy. Her child was the star of the show. It’s no wonder that she was so captivated by what was happening. For her it wasn’t just entertainment. She wasn’t in the theater just to watch a performance. For her, that night of music and drama was a participation in a relationship of love.

I could take a few more minutes to explain why I’m remembering that theater experience and sharing it with you on Christmas Eve, but I’m sure you already know. Participating in a relationship of love, this is why we are here. Every year we gather on Christmas Eve to worship and to celebrate the birth of Jesus. Because the tradition of what we are doing is so familiar, there is a risk that we may miss how God is drawing us into what is happening. Oh, we know the songs by heart. We’ve watched the drama of this night many times. Like watching a professional theater company, it’s possible we might experience Christmas Eve as if it were a show that takes place on some distant historical stage. There are the familiar characters, of course; the shepherds and angels, the holy family, and the animals in the Bethlehem stable. It’s a scene we easily call to mind and, like the rerun of a holiday movie, we know how the story ends and we can recite most of the lines from Luke’s Gospel by heart. But God wants more for us at Christmas. God wants us not only to remember the birth of a baby long ago but to experience the coming of Christ tonight. The mother sitting next to me at the Broadway show wasn’t in the theater that night just to watch. She was there because her child was at the center of the action and it was love wrapping around her that brought her into the drama. The Holy One born in Bethlehem is God’s child and that Holy Child is given to us in love. And so, we are here tonight, not just to watch but to feel God’s love wrapping around us. On Christmas Eve, it is more than just sitting in our seats to enjoy the sights and sounds. Christmas Eve brings us into the drama. We are there as Christ is born. We are there as Christ comes into our world and into our lives.

Just yesterday, as I was preparing to put the final touches on the message I’m sharing tonight, I heard my wife, Kelly, cry out from our basement that there was something terribly wrong. “What is it,” I called down to her. “There’s some kind of horrible water leak,” she cried. “There’s water coming from out of the ceiling.” Oh, this is really bad news, I thought. Now, once again, just mentioning “bad news” on an evening and in a season that should be filled with “good news” seems wildly out of place, but stay with me as I explain why I’m sharing this with you tonight. Sure enough, there was water flowing from the basement ceiling in a place where there should never be water. We shut off the main water supply, called an emergency plumbing service, moved everything out of the way, including newly wrapped Christmas presents, and we worked like crazy to get ready for the repair and the cleanup. Have you ever had something happen that suddenly changed all of the plans. Well, our plans for that day changed dramatically. What was happening demanded our full attention and energy. Do you see why I wanted to share that with you tonight? If bad news can alter the flow of our lives just thing was unbelievably good news can do. Christ is born. God comes to be with us. We are there as God’s love wraps around us and this incredible gift is an event that changes everything. We’ve got lots of plans at Christmas and we always do, but what God is doing invites our full

attention and energy. And, the coming of Christ is good news. In fact, it is such good news that no amount of bad news can ever steal the day.

It's Christmas Eve and tonight is the time, in a spiritual way, to move to the edge of our seats, bring our hands to our hearts, and to prepare to be wrapped in love. Tonight, God wants more than for us to simply enjoy our Christmas Eve worship. God wants us to be transported by it. God brings us into the drama of Christ's coming. And, if there is any darkness in us at all, if there is any bad news weighing on us or creeping in to steal our hope away, we are there to receive the gift of God's unwavering presence with us. Christmas has come. Christ has come. The light is shining in the darkness and the gift is given. What joy there is tonight, and not just a joy for the world. There is joy for us, because we are there to take our place within this relationship of love.