**Christmas Eve 2014**

How does the world look from the point of view of an Elf? Or more accurately, how does the world look through the eyes of someone playing an elf at a department store in the days leading up to Christmas.

This week Minnesota Public Radio continued its tradition of having David Sedaris read from his Santa Land Diaries, which are apparently based on his first hand experience as an elf at one of Macy’s Department stores. I will acknowledge from the outset, that all these stories are about moms, which begs the question, “where are the dads?”

Sedaris begins by describing how elves are trained for various roles including entrance elves, exit elves, water cooler elves, cash register elves, and pictures elves. In each of those roles elves are expected to be happy, perky and smiling at all times. Sedaris apparently never quite got the role down. On any given shift an elf might encounter fist fights, vomiting, angry children and angry parents. On one occasion Crumpet the Elf, that was Sedari’s Elf name, was standing in a hall way near two long lines, one was for the women’s bathroom and the other for seeing Santa. A woman, who had already asked Crumpet about a hundred questions then said to the elf, which line is for the women’s bathroom. To which Crumpet replied, “I am guessing the one with all the women in it.” To which the lady replied, “I’m going to have you fired.” Crumpet said to himself, “I’m wearing a green velvet costume and a hat with sparkly spangles, that’s a threat?”

One mom’s little boy was throwing a tantrum as she was paying for her pictures. Exasperated the mom said, “Riley if you don’t start behaving yourself, Santa’s not going to give you any of those toys you asked for”. Then she said to Crumpet, “tell him he has to behave or Santa will bring only coal”. Crumpet the Elf replied, “Santa doesn’t traffic in coal anymore. Instead if you don’t behave Santa comes and steals all your stuff”. He told the boy how Santa would come take his TV and all his electronics, moving on to the family car, towels and blanket, until the worried mom said, “that will do.”

Among the things the elf saw that day was an exasperated mom trying to get her daughter to sit on Santa’s lap for a picture. The daughter was absolutely refusing, making a fuss and crying. Mom gave her daughter a slap and said, “Rachel get on that man’s lap or I will give you something to cry about.” The little girl was put on Santa’s lap and Crumpet the elf took the picture. Sedaris concludes his life through the eyes of an elf story by saying “the picture supposedly means everything is exactly the way it is supposed to be, that everything is snowy and wonderful. It is not about Santa or Christmas or anything but the parent’s idea of a world they cannot make work for them.”

Whether it is Santa in the Department store or Jesus in the manger one of the challenges we all face at this time of the year is the tension we encounter between our ideas about how life should be and the world we actually encounter. Like Santa and his elves in a department store we create for the baby Jesus an idealized world that is nothing like the world we know. Jesus is surrounded by happy, perky, smiling shepherds and later wise men grinning from ear to ear. Intuitively we know we don’t belong in this picture, it doesn’t fit our world or our lives. But it is hard to escape the feeling that the only way to be included in the promise of love is if you join the shepherds, the wise men as together you say “cheese.” In the process we create false memories of a world we cannot make work.

Whether one hears the story of Jesus birth as a literal recounting of the way things actually happened or a metaphor laden story about who Jesus is, we are given a picture that is far from perfect. This is no idealized version of life upon which false memories can be based. There is nothing about this story that requires you to cozy up to shepherds for a nice group picture, put your arm around the three wise men, like long time friends, or crowd together with Mary and Joseph pretending to be one big happy family. On the contrary, our Gospel story invites us, encourages us to let go of all those idealized versions of the way we think life should be.

Most of us have little envy for those who have to fly somewhere over the holidays. Crowded airports, weather disruptions, security checks, cramped seats, all combine to make travel less than desirable. Whatever discomfort folks might encounter, it pales in comparison to Joseph and Mary who as Luke tells us are forced to travel because the Emperor is exercising his muscle, reminding the people who is in control, demanding they return to their home towns to register for the tax. Even if we imagine Mary riding on a donkey, this is no easy trip.

Luke goes on to tell us that either red lining is taking place in Bethlehem, denying the family housing because of who they are or the accommodations are simply full. Either way, Mary and Joseph spend the night in a drafty stable, no doubt with smelly animals, which are anything but cute. I grew up on a farm. I was never once tempted to sleep in the barn.

Although we often try and romanticize the shepherds, this only really works if you think doing late night shift work for less than minimum wage sounds appealing to you. Luke tells us the shepherds are watching their sheep by night. By their sheep, Luke does not mean the sheep the shepherds own. Luke means the sheep owned by someone else, guarded by the shepherds who must stay up all night keeping watch. The shepherds hardly represent an idealized version of life.

The story hardly improves with the appearance of the wise men. They arrive in Bethlehem, keeping a close eye on fellow travelers, watching to see if they have been followed, because these wise men have been warned in a dream that Herod is fearful this child has the potential to upend his rule of terror. There is nothing romantic or ideal about the birth of Jesus.

On the contrary, the story of Jesus birth invites us to see the world through the eyes of those who suffer, those who struggle and those who face injustice of any type. Here is how South African Theologian, Allan Boseak puts it, “When Jesus came into the world, he looked with the eyes of one born to a single mother, and living under a cloud of scandal….He looked through the eyes of one born in a manger, in a stable, among the animals, the dirt and the dung, for whom there was no place in the respectable room of the inn. He looked through the eyes of a persecuted child, a refugee in hiding from the wrath of the vengeful, powerful, but threatened monarch. Jesus looked through the eyes of one who himself was poor, living among the poor and oppressed”. Jesus looks at the world through the eyes of God’s love and justice. Jesus continues looking through those eyes all the way to the cross, trusting that God’s love never ends at the cross.

You may have read or seen on the news how Pope Francis gathered the Roman Curia together for a Christmas message. Some of those religious leaders apparently have developed a picture of Christmas that would make Crumpet the elf cringe. Francis chastised them for their spiritual Alzheimer’s. He cautioned against the lust for power and lack of spiritual empathy. As much fun as it might be to imagine Bishops and Cardinals squirming in front of the Pope, the truth is what Francis said to the Bishops applies to us all. When life is going our way, when we feel success is on our side, when privilege is ours for the grasping, it is easy to substitute the reality of Jesus’ birth for one that asks little of us. It is tempting to romanticize God’s love born in Bethlehem, make it sweet and simple, like nothing more than sitting on Santa’s lap at Christmas. King Herod had it right, recognizing that wherever God’s love is born into our lives and world, it poses a threat to indifference, suffering and powers of injustice.

There is no need to force a crying child to have her picture taken with Santa or fake a happy pose with the shepherds, wise men and Holy Family in a when you only feeling like grieving. The gift of God’s love is born amidst the challenges and struggles of life. God’s love is born to those who are protesting the killing of young Africa American men. God’s love is born to police officers grieving the murder of fellow police officers or fearful that they might be next. There is nothing picture perfect about where and how God’s love is made known, but it is made known to you, to me, to moms, to dads, to upset children, to those who are well off, to those who suffer, to all the human family and creation itself. That is our promise. The God of unflinching vulnerability is here among us. This is a story that will work for us all.

As far as I know, there are no elves here tonight, but with or without elves you are invited to become part of the picture of God’s love and God’s justice made real in our world and in our lives.