

How you respond to life and its challenges and surprises really matters.

A student once wrote about when he learned this lesson. "During my second month of college, our professor gave us a pop quiz. I was a conscientious student and had breezed through the questions until I read the last one: 'What is the first name of the woman who cleans the school?'

"Surely this was some kind of joke. I had seen the cleaning woman several times. She was tall, dark-haired and in her 50's, but how would I know her name? I handed in my paper, leaving the last question blank.

"Just before class ended, one student asked if the last question would count toward our quiz grade. 'Absolutely,' said the professor. 'In your careers, you will meet many people. All are significant. They deserve your attention and care, even if all you do is smile and say 'hello.'"

"I've never forgotten that lesson. I also learned her name. It was Dorothy."

Who you are matters. How you respond to life, along with its challenges and surprises really matters as well. Every opportunity offers us a choice in how we respond.

Tonight, you are here for Christmas. We have heard the Christmas story. How are you going to respond?

**If you are here, because someone else wants you to be here,** you might be responding by looking at your watch. You are here, not for you, not for your growth in faith. You are here for someone else.

In all honesty, you will leave this place largely untouched by a remarkable story with a remarkable message. Because you simply here, putting in time.

That is a choice. That is the way many go through life. We simply put in our time. We let whatever is going to happen, happen. And it usually doesn't really touch us or affect us. That is a choice.

**Others of you are here because you want to be here, because you need to be here.** You sing in the choir, you play music. You are ushering.

You see it as your role to help worship happen well, so that others may come and be touched by the love, the grace, the hope and wonder of the story. Thank you.

**Some are even here, because you are looking, you are searching, you are hoping for the mystery of this story to touch you once again, as it has touched others through the years.** You are yearning to hear and feel the presence of God in something that happens, maybe in the sermon, or a song, or the candles that get lit. But you are here to allow this story to touch you and bring you closer to God. That is also a choice.

I believe that if we are going to allow ourselves to be touched by the mystery of this story, it begins with a choice. To see, to hear and to not overlook what may seem small and insignificant. And that is tough because for many of us this is such a familiar story, we can recite it to each other because we know it so well.

We can be so good at telling the story of the birth of Jesus, without pausing long enough to hear its significance. Like the college student who walked by the cleaning lady, we move past the familiar without letting it really touch us or impact us. That is a choice. Is it one you want to make for your life?

For me, there are many moments of significance to this story, from Mary traveling with Joseph while she was so pregnant. Giving birth to Jesus when it was time. Then there is the announcement to the shepherds, that Jesus is born.

Shepherds in that society were insignificant. They were everywhere. That was the job you did, if you could not do a job. You could at least be a shepherd.

But it is to some of the least, most insignificant people in that society that the announcement came "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce to you a remarkable thing. Something that is meant for everyone world wide.

A savior has been born. Go and see for yourself. You will find the baby wrapped in a blanket lying in a manger.'

And the shepherds make a choice, do we go and see for ourselves. Or do we go back to sleep and pretend it was a dream.

We know they choice they make, they go to see the child and we are told that it made a huge difference for them. As they left seeing the child, telling everyone they could.

Choice, life is filled with choices. Even about our faith we make choices.

A mother once wrote, "Each December, I vowed to make Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. I had cut back on non-essential obligations -- extensive card writing, endless baking, decorating, and even overspending. Yet still, I found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments, and of course, the true meaning of Christmas.

My son, Nicholas, was in kindergarten that year. It was an exciting season for a six-year-old. For weeks, he'd been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant."

I didn't have the heart to tell him I'd be working the night of the production. Unwilling to miss his shining moment, I spoke with his teacher. She assured me there'd be a dress rehearsal the morning of the presentation. All parents unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then. Fortunately, Nicholas seemed happy with the compromise.

So, the morning of the dress rehearsal, I filed in ten minutes early, found a spot on the cafeteria floor and sat down. Around the room, I saw several other parents quietly scampering to their seats. As I waited, the students were led into the room. Each class, accompanied by their teacher, sat cross-legged on the floor. Then, each group, one by one, rose to perform their song.

Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as Christmas, I didn't expect anything other than fun, commercial entertainment - songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer.

So, when my son's class rose to sing, "Christmas Love," I was slightly taken aback by its bold title.

Nicholas was aglow, as were all of his classmates, adorned in fuzzy mittens, red sweaters, and bright snowcaps upon their heads. Those in the front row-center stage -- held up large letters, one by one, to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing "C is for Christmas," a child would hold up the letter C. Then, "H is for Happy," and on and on, until each child holding up his portion had presented the complete message, "Christmas Love."

The performance was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her; a small, quiet, girl in the front row holding the letter "M" upside down, totally unaware her letter "M" appeared as a "W."

The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one's mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood tall, proudly holding her "W." Although many teachers tried to shush the children, the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together.

A hush came over the audience and eyes began to widen. In that instant, we understood the reason we were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities.

For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear:

"CHRISTWASLOVE"

That is what Christmas is all about. It is about the gift of Love God offers the world. The Babe in the manger is but one of many examples of that love. Will you receive that gift of love this Christmas?

It really is a choice.

May God help us live lives of faith. Merry Christmas.

Amen