

## Pasta Batman

December 24, 2021 at First Church in Cambridge, Congregational, UCC

Rev. Daniel A. Smith

Years ago, I heard on the radio a light-hearted true story, as told by two brothers, Valion and Paris Lotze, ages 12 and 13. The title was The Greatest Dog Name Ever.<sup>1</sup>

Valion, the 12-year-old, began it: *I wanted to name him Pasta. I used to like pasta a lot. And it was probably the first thing that came to my mind, so out of nowhere, I said Pasta. So, he said Batman.*

His older brother Paris picks up: *I wanted to name him Batman because I saw, in a movie, the dog stuck his head out the window and his ears went straight up. And it looked like-- it reminded me of Batman.*

Valion: *And we fought over it....*

Paris: *I just remember running around and chasing each other. I was jumping on my mom's bed, saying, Batman, Batman, Batman. And then my brother was sitting in the chair, saying, Pasta, Pasta, Pasta. And that must have gone on for an hour.*

Valion next says: *I think it was right around the time we had this big fight about gumballs, which I'm not going to get into because it was pretty embarrassing. But if there was just some little thing that we couldn't agree on, then it would just blow up into this whole big thing.*

Paris: *Yeah, I remember being pretty upset about it. And then my mom comes in and says, all right, that's it. It's over. [The dog's name] is Pasta Batman. That's it.*

Valion: *And then there was silence. And then from there, he was Pasta Batman Lotze.*

Pasta Batman! Greatest Dog name ever! The kids then call the dog into the room where the recording was happening. Here Pasta! Here Pasta Batman! Good doggie!

The end! The title could have just as easily been “best parenting move ever”. God love that mother! So simple, the perfect compromise, a fair settlement of what could have easily led to a

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.thisamericanlife.org/241/20-acts-in-60-minutes/act-eight-7>

lifetime of grudge-holding resentment, rivalry, maybe even therapy at least for the kid that didn't get his way. Don't you love it? That's it, it's over, Pasta Batman! If only it could always be so simple, right?

Here we are again, amidst another surge, some home alone, some with loved ones, a few participants here, most tuning in. My guess is just about all of us are holding some anxiety and disease or exasperation, if only for having to wrestle with yet more impossible decisions. Within our own families. Within our church. Within our country right now! We long for a grown-up who can give us the answers! We long to get what we most want and need even amidst the often complicating and complex reality that we have all these human siblings that want something else.

So, what does all this have to do with Christmas, and why did I start with that Pasta-Batman story? First, Christmas is the great reminder that our God is a both/and God. Christ is born, and just like that, Pasta Batman-style, as if with a loving parent's stroke of confident wisdom, God is both divine and human, both up there and in here and all around us, both spiritual and political, both mercy and justice. God is already here and yet always drawing near! Our stories backdrop? Both a brutal, violent empire run by selfish despots and a sleepy barn outback with all the animals to boot. God comes to the manger this holy night - with infinite power and love *and* God shows up in a tiny, humble, baby-sized gift of life that is the epitome of vulnerability! God's love is both eternal, as we just sang, and temporal, now in flesh appearing! What's more, God's both/and ways are meant to teach us all that we, every last one of us carries an everlasting divine spark of love, right in our bodies, no matter what shape they are in! Pasta-Batman may be the best dog name ever. But Christmas is the best story. Why? Because it brings together what is otherwise divided! As Richard Rohr writes: There's really only one message [at Christmas], and we just have to keep saying it until finally, we're undefended enough to hear it and to believe it: *there is no separation between God and creation.*" *That's it!* *We can't begin to comprehend the revolutionary power of what that means, that by the gift of Christmas, God is with us, inseparably!*

Even setting aside the theology for a moment, the Pasta Batman story has been staying with me this week because of its simplicity! For Christmas is also a story about profound and humble simplicity! If your feel like your life has just been way too complicated lately then receive the invitation to pause and take in the simple gift of love! Tonight, we have one job and one job only, truly - even for those of you that are cooking and still have gifts to wrap. That stable was surely a mess too, with hungry people and animals and interruptions. Yet in the most ordinary and messy of places, God comes to us, and our job is to adore him, to love him, and to know he loves us. You don't have to be at church to receive this great simple gift. In fact, if you're sitting in a kitchen, or under a blanket on a cot in a shelter, or Uncle Vinny's couch, you may be far closer to the original storyline than you think! The story is that simple! It works for anyone, anywhere. Love is born anew! Hope is born anew! God's both/and indivisible power and LOVE, for which Covid, or despots, or fear are no match are rekindled tonight! Christmas is about simple things, for why else would be Christ be born in a stable, in a setting that has been stripped down to the bare essentials. There is nothing simple about poverty - far from it, and yet there is a clarity of what matters, a profound simplicity of basic human needs, longings, and desires that this story reveals to us, that God chose the most vulnerable form, a poor, Palestinian child in which to reveal divine love and glory! The Shaker Hymn ought to be a Christmas Carol - 'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free, 'tis a gift to come down where we ought to be!

Finally, Christmas reminds us of what a dear friend told me in a basement bar one evening when I was sharing my anxiety about something or other! He said Dan, Dan, you already have more than you need! And in that moment of fellowship, I realized he was absolutely right! And so counter-cultural at this time of year especially. Try it on all of you, Kate, Peter, Sarah, you already have more than you need! Because Christ is born, because Love is born, because God and love unconditional are already here, in our midst! What we really need is a truth that is deeper than any headlines, fake news or otherwise! A love that is stronger than any threat of illness or death! A nourishment that is more sustaining than the greatest of roasts beasts and Christmas feasts! A faith that can move mountains! A beyond human hope! With that simple gift of Christ's birth into our hearts, each of us already has what we need, the gift of unconditional love! Think of Pasta Batman, they're arguing but they already had a new dog! The mom knew in her wisdom they already had something so supremely joyful! I mean what's better than a new dog, whatever you call it? If you ask my daughter, nothing! Here again, it's both/and! God's love, like a mother's wisdom, helps us remember, we already have the greatest gift. The spark of divine love is born again in each of us tonight, the promise that God is with us, no matter what we are going through.

Praise God for simple gifts and for both/and ways, especially amidst these complex and anxious days! As I wrote in a prayer I sent to the congregation this week,

God,  
Let your angels say it to every heart:  
Be not afraid!  
For there is good news, too!  
There is great joy, too!  
There is glory and majesty and beauty, too!  
For You are God,  
and You are good!  
All the time.  
Amen.