

Christmas - C – 12/24/07 – Luke 2:1-20 – Do You See What I See? – Pastor Charlie

Our family has always looked forward to Advent and getting out Kay's handmade ceramic crèche. We've had it for over 25 years. Each figure is carefully unwrapped and set on the table. Then we place the manger on the buffet, and then carefully set the precious pieces in place. The angel, being the most delicate, is always placed last. One December, we couldn't find the baby Jesus. We spent what seemed like hours searching through bubble wrap, tissue paper, and every conceivable place we could think of. We turned the boxes upside down and inside out in search of the ceramic Jesus. Finally we found him in a discarded wad of paper.

That search has become a metaphor. Each Advent season, I open my eyes to the world around me and try to find Jesus. The Jesus I've come to know isn't ceramic or fragile; he isn't some "hands off" type of figurine we set on the mantel to adore, but rather a sturdy figure who withstands the grist and grit of daily life. Sometimes the search for Jesus requires me to look in unlikely places – as in a conversation with a child, a brief talk with the cashier at the store, welcoming a homeless person to our Friday breakfast, or visiting a member in a care facility. Too often we are so busy looking for Jesus in the obvious places that we miss encountering him in our daily relationships. The characters we find in the Christmas story all point to people opening their lives to God's possibilities and discovering an inner strength, a light in the darkness that helps them find their way.

Think about the main characters in the Christmas story. Mary and Joseph, peasant girl and carpenter, were working class people who scraped to get by. They'd be among the working poor in our culture – struggling to make rent, without healthcare, and certainly no pension other than Social Security. In this story, they were forced to leave their workplace in Nazareth and journey 90 miles south over rugged terrain to Bethlehem because of a government census. No one was looking out for them. It didn't matter that Mary was within weeks of her due date. When they arrived in Bethlehem their welcome wasn't cordial. Extended family had no room for them; the inn had no vacancies. The innkeeper probably looked twice at Mary and made a snap decision not to get involved. More inconvenience lay ahead if she delivered while on the premises. Like modern day homeless people, Mary and Joseph settled for a place in the stable. At least they had the animals to keep them warm and the softness of the straw on which to lie. "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

The shepherds had a hard life, too. They lived on the fringe being out in the field more nights than they were at home. They were uneducated and had little hope of escaping the cycle of poverty. They would be among the people we find today on the corner of Eugene and Lee Streets in Greensboro, what we call the day laborers, or the people who work two part-time jobs but receive no benefits, or the migrant workers who eek out a living and send money back home to their families. These are the people who feel forgotten, who hope only to make it from day-to-day. To these people the angels appeared and announced the incredible good news: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

The Christmas story reminds us that the extraordinary comes hidden beneath the ordinary occurrences of every day life. Salvation comes in many forms: a delivered meal for those who cannot prepare their own, breakfast at the Night Shelter for those with no home, an apartment for the Chronically Homeless, a ride to chemotherapy, a house built by Habitat, Angel tree gifts for children and families that have little means, rent money for an unemployed family, and subsidized housing for a man living off of Social Security.

The stories of the Scriptures proclaim that God sees the situations in which we find ourselves and comes to rescue us. God steps into our lives ever so gently with the Light, with the birth of the Christ-child, a Light that is hidden beneath the form of human flesh; human flesh that takes the shape of people like you and me. When we allow the Light of God's love to shine through our lives, when we give ourselves freely to others and walk with them in their darkness, the Light makes the way easier. Mind you, it doesn't take away the pain of the situation – of traveling to Bethlehem and birthing in a barn or keeping sheep in a cold, dark field, but it does provide us with a way to get through it, and it does keep us connected with God and each other.

On this Christmas we long for the message of the angels to come true in our lives and world. We pray for peace on earth and good will among all people. But the story reminds us that God has to shake up our lives before that peace comes. If we were told that Christ would be born in us, would we, like Mary and Joseph, believe? If we were invited to come and see like the shepherds, would we drop what we were doing and go? And when we got there, what would we see – a baby born to a young, struggling family, or the Messiah? Would we believe the incredible good news that God is coming to rescue us?

The rector of St. Thomas Church in Huntsville, Alabama, tells the story about the women of the church inviting children with cerebral palsy for a Christmas party. They came as guests. The healthy children of the parish put on a pageant for them. The kids in the special education class were served cookies and refreshments made by the church women, and one of the men dressed as Santa Claus and gave the children their Christmas presents.

After two years of doing the pageant this way, a teacher in the cerebral palsy class suggested that perhaps her students could return some of generosity by participating in a shared Christmas festivity. At first the women of St. Thomas were tentative about changing, but then agreed to experiment. It was a cold, rainy day that first Tuesday when the cerebral palsy class performed the Christmas pageant at St. Thomas. There was Mary and Joseph, one little African American boy and one little white girl, in wheel chairs. The angel could not keep her arms from flying in the air. The shepherds came on crutches. The Wise Men took a long time to get from the back of the parish hall to the manger with their arms waving and pulling their own wheelchairs. It was almost impossible to understand the narrator because of her speech impediment, but everyone knew the story. No one tried to help anyone else, and no one felt embarrassed. It was quiet at first and then there was laughter and sometimes there were tears. The simple truth from the manger was not denied - some of us have cerebral palsy and some do not; some are children and some are adults; some are African American and some are white; some are poor and some are rich. But we are all human beings, and while our uniqueness defines and separates us, Christ's comes to save each and every one of us, and it is Christ's love and presence that unites us.

“Behold, I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people – young and old, African American, Native American, Hispanic, and Caucasian, healthy and infirmed, employed and unemployed, housed and homeless, healthy and chronically ill, wealthy and impoverished: to you – to each of you - is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Do you see what I see? The love that comes to us in Christ is durable and rugged. For people of faith the birth is a sign that God is alive and at work in the world. Christ comes again, is born again, when lives are transformed by his love, when forgiven and restored women and men begin to live new lives in a world that is suddenly new because he was born into it.