



“Christmas Message 2018”
Scripture – Luke 2:1-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Monday, December 24, 2018

Luke paints quite the picture for us, doesn't he? The Roman emperor decreed that everyone must go to their family's city to be counted in the census, and the next thing you know people are crisscrossing in every direction. The timing of the mandate could not have been worse for Mary. On the verge of giving birth to her first child, she and Joseph had to travel 80 miles to Bethlehem. With multitudes on the move, the inns were packed, so when Mary gave birth she wrapped her child in bands of cloth and after holding him, nursing him, and singing him to sleep, she laid him in a manger.

Shepherds were out in the fields keeping an eye out for predators while their flock bedded down for the night. I picture several shepherds sitting around a campfire, amusing one another with tall tales, and passing around a wineskin. Suddenly a messenger of God appeared in their midst. The shepherds – tough men who lived outside and were unafraid to take on wolves cowered in fear of this celestial intruder.

The mysterious figure said, “Do not be afraid, I have astonishing news for you. To you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is Christ the Lord!” While rubbing their eyes and questioning whether they had passed the wineskin around once too many times, a multitude of the heavenly host appeared, glorifying God and sharing God's dream of peace on earth.

The shepherds jump to their feet and rush into town where they find Mary and Joseph hovering over their child. Soon, the shepherds are sharing the news with others, but Mary is pondering what it all means.

Luke is a master storyteller, and as his words wash over us, we are transported to another place. Not only to a far-away land in a distant time, but to a place free of news about government shut-downs and Presidential tweets free of worries about our health or our savings, free of reminders about wars and tsunamis and people who suffer. For an hour we can set aside all that is wrong with the world and focus on love and joy and hope.

That is exactly what Tasha Blackburn was counting on when she went to her church on Christmas Eve to see the children's Christmas pageant. She had looked forward to singing her favorite Christmas hymns, watching the little girls with their angel wings and halos, and being amused by the little boys in their oversized bathrobes holding their shepherd crooks. She remembered the previous year when three boys strutted in with shiny costumes and Burger King crowns. They wore dark sunglasses because they were the ultra-cool “wise guys.”

When she arrived, the sanctuary was packed for this retelling of the birth of Jesus. Tasha had to find a seat near the back of the sanctuary where she could barely see what was happening on the chancel.

She said, “Within two verses of ‘Away in a Manger’ something went terribly wrong.” Something – or rather someone – was intruding on her view of the pageant – a young girl named Morgan.

Morgan was sixteen years old and throughout her life she had suffered from a weak spinal column. She was strapped into a back brace and her tiny frame was fragile. One of her medical treatments left her bedridden and unable to eat without becoming nauseated. She dwindled to 50 pounds and had to be strapped onto a stretcher to go anywhere.

And there was Morgan between Tasha and the chancel on which Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus were displayed. Morgan’s mother had rolled her stretcher to a place where Morgan could see the pageant, and she was lying directly in front of Tasha.

“Things were terribly wrong,” Tasha said, because “no matter how I turned my head or averted my eyes, I could not watch the pageant without having Morgan as part of the picture. To see Jesus’ birth I had to look through Morgan! The contrast was acutely painful – the singing and dancing children, and Morgan lying on her bed, clapping with one hand against her stretcher.”

“How could the praises of the children and the joy of the congregation possibly be true with Morgan lying there? How could their collective Glorias not be a delusion?”

Tasha wanted to leave. It was too painful to believe in hope while coming face to face with this image. But then she said, “I cannot tell you what happened. I’m not completely sure what changed, but I knew I had to stay.” And by the end of the children’s singing and storytelling it hit her. While the Christmas story was almost unbearable to watch with Morgan in its frame, the story also made little sense unless she was there. Their rejoicing rang hollow without her. The little plastic baby in the box of hay remained a toy unless she had to look through Morgan to see Jesus. God’s glory is not really glory unless viewed with suffering in the same frame.¹

The message of Christmas is not a Disney production about escaping reality. It is not about insulating ourselves from the pain and poverty of the world. Jesus comes to those “places where grief hangs heavy and hope is hard to find.”² He comes to point the way for those who have a habit of getting lost, which best I can tell, is all of us.

We grapple for words to explain this mystery of Jesus being filled with God as no other, but we come up short. Yet, we gather each year at Christmas to celebrate the birth of Jesus, because we know it is a powerful declaration of God’s love for the world.

People had always thought that the greatest power in the world was the kind of power that Roman occupiers used to force people to gather up their belongings and march miles to some destination so that their names could be placed on the tax rolls and registered for the draft. But Christ was born to show that God rules by another kind of power. The power of love. And love has the power to do what brute force cannot do – transform hearts. Love has the power to do what brute force cannot do – give life meaning. Love has the power to do what brute force cannot do – heal deep wounds. Love has the power to do what brute force cannot do – inspire hope.

The message of Christmas is that there is light in the darkness. And that light is love.

NOTES

1. Michael Jinkins, tells the story of his student, Tasha Blackburn, in “Behold,” delivered at the Lilly Endowment Christmas Luncheon, December 22, 2011.
2. Janet Hunt, “What Christmas Eve is For,” *DancingwiththeWord.com*, December 21, 2014.