



"Christmas Message"
Scripture – Luke 2:1-20
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Friday, December 24, 2021

Urban Promise is one of the very impressive local ministries we support. It helps Wilmington at risk children and youth succeed academically and become grounded in basic Christian values. The staff sat down with a few of their young children and asked them to tell the Christmas story. Fortunately, the camera was rolling so we can enjoy their responses.

The video begins with a cute little girl who appears to be about five. She says, "Mary was in the kitchen making soup when an angel appeared. And the angel said, "Do not be afraid. You're going to have a baby. And you'll name it, ummm. I forgot.

A second child appears on camera and she understands Mary's visceral reaction to the angel's announcement. She says, "And Mary said, "What?!"

A little boy explains the journey to Bethlehem. His description may be different than the one pictured in your mind. He says, "They didn't have a car so they had to walk. But as soon as they found that deer, they jumped on the deer and rode it! (When they got to Bethlehem) they found a bed that was nice, but under it was a lot of junky stuff. The wife and the husband said, "Oh my! This is a very reckless, junky room. And then the husband said, "We must get out of here!"

A couple of children explain where Mary and Joseph went after getting out of the junky room. "It would have been scary in somebody's stable with animals. It was a lot of animals. Skunks, a possum maybe. A chicken!"

Other children take turns sharing parts of the story as they remember it. [Mary had the baby] "and Mary called him Jesus and he was the Savior, Christ the Lord."

A little boy explains what happened in the fields outside of Bethlehem. He says, "The angels woke up the shepherds [and the angels said,] "There's a baby king being born in a manger. So they got on their calf or maybe it was a horse and they rode so they could see the baby Jesus."

A little girl provides King Herod's reaction to the news: "Try to kill Jesus" because he was jealous and he didn't want Jesus to be the king. Jesus might want to take his throne. [She pauses to ponder this and then says] But Jesus was just a baby. How can a baby be in a throne? They need a baby highchair."

Another child explains, "Wise men saw the star and they followed it. When they saw the baby, they bowed down to him. They brought him presents like gold and stuff." Another child fills in what the 'stuff' was: "Diapers, baby toys, and treasure."

And then, wrapping up the video, two children reflect on the *meaning* of Christmas. A sweet little girl says, "Jesus Christ is one of our Christmas presents." A little boy says, "Every time when God gives you something, receive it. Be grateful. Christmas is not just about presents, the tree, and candy canes. [He pauses for dramatic effect and says] One word. [For emphasis he repeats it louder] One word! And that's love."

Well, they may have taken a bit of poetic license with the gospel story, but they certainly caught the gist of it. Could anyone tell it any better? Christmas is about love. It's about laughter and joy; it's about the dawning of a better day than many of the days those children live. Christmas is about catching glimpses of God's kingdom and yearning for the day when love and peace rule in people's hearts and people aren't fighting over patches of land or race or religion or gender or sexual orientation or political ideology.

We all know there is a part of Christmas that is fairy tale and make believe – Santa Claus slipping down the chimney, Rudolph leading a team of reindeer, and a snowman "with a corn cob pipe and a button nose, and two eyes made out of coal." However, the reason we gather for worship tonight is because there is a very down to earth side to the birth of the babe of Bethlehem.

The first Christmas was far from idyllic. To remind everyone who controlled their lives, the Roman Emperor Augustus forced everyone to trek to their hometown to be registered. It was how he insured that his government would be paid the hefty taxes he demanded. It was his attempt to declare his superiority and to force his version of reality on others.

It was a dark time for those in Palestine – as it is today. The decree meant Joseph and a very-full-with-child, Mary, had to make an 80-mile journey south from the village of Nazareth to Bethlehem. And, as today, Bethlehem was under occupation.

To pile onto their difficulties, this poor young couple – far from home and family – could not secure proper lodging and had to bunk with the animals. Soon after nestling in with the four-legged creatures – perhaps a possum, but hopefully not a skunk – Mary gave birth to Jesus and laid him in the feeding trough.

That humble birth, far from any seat of power or media source, signaled a burst of light, a surge of hope. The birth of Jesus declares that God is not a distant deity, untouched by the events on earth. As the Urban Promise child said, "One word. One word. Love."

God loves our world and is present with us. Love is the driving force behind joy, behind peace, behind hope. Jesus embodied love and made it clear that there is no higher calling for any of us than to become lovers of God's creation and one another.

At a time when threats and hateful words fill the airwaves, we are to be a band of resistance by showing the world a better way. Following the path of Jesus, we are to demonstrate to the world that love can heal, reconcile, inspire, and bring light to the dark corners of our world.

Never forget that God did not call Jesus to his ministry because all was well, but because so much was wrong. Justice was trampled underfoot, mercy was in short supply, and peace was only a dim hope. Some days, when

the grim news is frightening, it can feel as if there is no reason to expect anything better, not a single reason to cling to hope.

Christmas complicates things because it refuses to declare that the way things are today is how they will always be. Christmas complicates things because it declares that despite the craziness, despite the lies, despite the greed, despite the paranoia, despite the hate, despite all the darkness, there is a light – a light that will never be extinguished. Lies and greed and hate may triumph for a day, but their time is limited, because God will never stop partnering with us until truth and justice and love are established on earth.

That is why Christmas ought to be celebrated with such joy. The birth of Jesus is a proclamation of hope. God loves each one of us and seeks to lead us to a new world. A world where every child is loved and every person respected. A world where everyone gets a fair shake and all settle their disagreements without violence.

So despite school shootings and countries at war, despite contentious disagreements and young killers turned into celebrities, despite global warming and a global pandemic, we cling to hope, because God loves the world and never, never, never stops presenting us with possibilities for a better day.

May Christ be born again in you and in me so that we may have the courage and the determination to partner with God in making this world what God dreams it can be. A world where love and justice intertwine to give birth to peace on earth and goodwill to all.