

SURPRISED BY JOY: FINDING GOD IN UNEXPECTED PLACES

Zephaniah 3:14-20

Philippians 4:4-9

Dear Christian friends, the first word on this third Sunday of Advent needs to be a “word of Grace” from you to me – for I have “stolen” the title, theme and at least some of the ideas for this sermon from two respected sources. First is C. S. Lewis, the late, brilliant professor and Christian writer who, guided by the Holy Spirit, worked his way from atheism through agnosticism to be “Surprised by Joy” as he became Christian, thoroughly committed to the Faith he had once despised. The second source is the Rev. Dr. Bryant M. Kirkland, former Princeton Seminary Professor and Pastor of the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, who was my teacher, mentor and friend. In a preaching (Homiletics) class one day, Bryant was speaking about where a pastor finds relevant and appropriate sermon material and illustrations. He went through the usual list of various printed and/or published resources, but then he said something I’ll never forget. He said, “You start by ‘being and always becoming God’s man’ (there were no women in seminaries at that time), then you ‘let life happen’ and you must be sure to ‘listen’ as it happens. All that’s left then is for you to ‘tell about it’.” With an openness like that to the “life of faith”, you’ll not be surprised to hear him tell the following story.

“I was traveling to preach on the West Coast. I needed the time on that long flight to prepare and study, so I buckled down and let everyone near me feel the tension – don’t bother me, I’m a busy man with places to go and work to do. A young woman and baby slipped into the seat next to mine. I thought, ‘This will be difficult,’ so I kept a straight face and looked very Presbyterian. It lasted for about six minutes. Pretty soon, this little boy began fussing around. ‘Man, man’, he cooed at me. I couldn’t resist, so I put my sermon back into the briefcase, picked him up out of the seat and just loved him all the way across the country. When we landed in Los Angeles, his mother said to me, ‘Thank you for doing that. He lost his father not long ago and he has no man to muss him up like that and love him. Thank you so very, very much.’” Dr. Kirkland said that as he got off the plane and pushed into the crowd, he realized just how much joy and peace that little boy brought into his own heart when he had least expected it.

Sometimes a child will do that for us. Sometimes a child can get into a heart that has been locked tight for years. Isn’t that what Christmas is all about? There is a child that has brought that kind of joy into multiplied millions of hearts. That’s what I’d like to think about with you on this third Sunday of Advent. What are the great truths of this season that can fill our hearts with joy and praise. Let’s consider three of them.

The first truth I want to consider today is communicated by that ancient Hebrew word IMMANUEL which is first transliterated into Greek then translated into English (Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:22). It means, “God is with us.” **Both in the most likely and the most unlikely of events, places and circumstances. GOD IS WITH US!**

That's the first piece of good news about Christmas. God did not remain in Heaven – receiving a computer printout on the world's sufferings. God did not issue a memo to form a committee to work on our dilemmas. No, God left the throne and came into the trenches. Indeed, God did more than that. God became one of the WOUNDED. His hands are nail-scarred. In Christ, God became the wounded healer (Isaiah 53:1-12). That is what makes Christmas like no other holiday in the world. First of all, Immanuel: God with us. But wait, there's more.

The Christmas story teaches us that GOD SPEAKS TO US, often in the most unthinkable places and through the most unlikely people. Certainly John the Baptist was an unlikely person to prepare the way for the Messiah. Clothes made of camel's hair; a diet of locusts and wild honey. No wonder Jesus chided the crowds: "What did you go out to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes?" If that's what the crowd went out to see, they were in for a shock. Then Jesus answered his own question: "A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet." (Matthew 11:7-9) God speaks to us in strange places and often through unlikely people.

Dr. John Killinger in his book, *Christmas Spoken Here* (Broadman Press) tells of a little girl who was hospitalized during the Christmas season. As the days passed and the test results were collected, it became obvious that she would not be able to come home by Christmas. Her prosperous and caring parents showered her with expensive gifts in an effort to make her feel better. There were great overstuffed animals, including a six-foot-tall giraffe, dolls, dollhouses and games of every description. The room was transformed into a miniature "Toys-R-Us". Every time her parents came to the hospital they brought another present. But they were never able to stay very long for they were always running off to some society function. One day the child was particularly unhappy in the midst of all these fine gifts and held desperately onto her mother as her mother gave her a kiss and a hug before rushing out to the next engagement. The mother tried to interest her daughter in the newest toy she had brought. Through tears the child cried, "Mommy, I don't want toys. I want you!" This is our greatest need, too, isn't it? We want God. We want to know that God lives and that God cares and that God is with us. Immanuel!

Though I've told this story before, I can't resist using it again. It's the story of the small church that each year put on the traditional nativity pageant. In that church was a lively ten-year-old boy who had managed to create a disaster in every Christmas play he had been in. The boy's name was Barry. One year his angel wings caught on fire which nearly burned the church down. The next year as Herod the Great, he jumped up from his throne and – in his usual clumsy way – jerked the carpet out from under three Wise men and dumped them on their heads. The children begged the children not to let Barry ruin another play: "Please, teacher, can't you leave Barry out this year?"

But the teacher could not reject a boy who tried his best and loved Jesus with all his heart – even if he was a little clumsy. She was able to convince the children that

Barry could not do any real damage by playing the innkeeper of Bethlehem. He just opened and closed the door and spoke one short line.

Barry made it perfectly through all rehearsals and the dress rehearsal. Then, on the night when mothers, fathers, friends, strangers and the whole community sat in hushed silence, reliving the Christmas story, Barry had his chance to “redeem” himself with a flawless performance. He opened the door of the inn and looked straight into the face of Mary and Joseph. Mary sat very sad and pale on a little donkey, which they never used in practice. You could almost hear the cold wind whistling around the cold stone walls of the inn and blowing the thin cloak of gentle Mary. But Barry came through! He said his line with professional emphasis and timing: “Begone, I have no room for the likes of you!” Mary and Joseph turned sadly away into the cold night, but Barry was into the real spirit and meaning of the play. Those who were on the front row saw tears well up in his eyes and his lips begin to tremble: “Wait!” It came like a thunderclap. Every heart in the room stopped! What on earth? That word was not in the script of the familiar Christmas story.

Then Barry finished it: “Wait! You can have my room!” Bedlam broke loose. Children cried. Parents were outraged. Pandemonium reigned. Barry had “ruined” another Christmas play. But the discerning teacher quieted the crowd, dried Barry’s tears as well as her own and said, “Maybe Barry was the real messenger after all. Only to those who have ‘room’ in their hearts, can the dear Christ Child enter in.” Won’t you agree that God comes to us in unexpected places and speaks through unexpected people? Sometimes we can become so busy celebrating Christmas that we fail to hear the voice of the Logos – of the Word made Flesh who spoke the first Christmas into existence.

But there’s one thing more that must be said. Because you can’t isolate the coming of the Baby from the rest of God’s activity in human history, Advent and Christmas are just a part of an unfolding drama. God is seeking the redemption of His creation. Isaiah describes it this way: “The eyes of the blind will be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped ... the lame leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute shout for joy ... And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness ...” Much of that prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. In a phrase that Randy and I both are accustomed to using in this season, we “stand between the already and the not yet”. It hasn’t all happened yet, but it all will happen. And for now, we realize that **the story of Christmas is not finished yet**. Each of us will choose how we finish the story in our own lives. And that is precisely where we stand on this third Sunday of Advent. Will we shout with Barry, “Wait! You can have my room!” which, I believe, is just another way of saying, “Wait! You can have my heart!” Or will we simply be observers who keep the Christ child in the manger where we can visit him without fail – just once every year?

A little girl named Schia was 4 years old when her baby brother was born. “Little Schia began to ask her parents to leave her alone with the new baby. They worried that, like most 4-year-olds, she might want to hit or shake him, so they said no. Over time, though, since Schia wasn’t showing signs of jealousy, they changed their minds and decided to let Schia have her private conference with the baby. Elated, Schia went into

the baby's room and shut the door, but it opened a crack – just enough for her concerned and curious parents to peek in and listen. They saw little Schia walk quietly up to her baby brother, put her face close to his and say, “Baby, tell me what God feels like. I’m starting to forget.” We come to Advent and Christmas each year to ask the Babe to remind us of what God is like. But the Christmas story is not finished yet. How it is finished in each of our lives is up to us.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

PRAYER: O God of the cradle and of the cross, grant that when Christmas comes upon us this year, we may have something more to show for our running about than tired feet, unwrapped presents and regrets for cards not sent. Help us to know that in Immanuel, you are always with us. Help us to be aware that if we look for you we will surely find you – but often in unexpected places and in unexpected people. And above all, help us to finish the Christmas story again this year by bowing before the cradle and worshipping beneath the cross of Jesus. In his wondrous and Holy name we pray.
Amen.

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