

“Sometimes, It Takes a Child”  
Presbyterian Church in Sudbury  
Isaiah 9:2,6-7; Luke 2:1-20

Richard E. Otty  
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Christmas Eve

The light we mark this night is one that breaks into the darkneses of the people of Israel in exile, and shepherds at work in nighttime fields. It is not a leading light as is the star the magi will follow on Epiphany, but it is a revealing light. It is not the light one uses to traverse a path, but the one one uses to discover what is in deep corner of a dark closet.

The prophet Isaiah wrote of such a light seven hundred years before Jesus was born. Israel's king, Hezekiah, was corrupt and ill-fitted, and a disgrace to the legacy of King David. The Messiah Isaiah foresees is not the Jesus of centuries hence, but a child in the line of David who will restore God's reign of justice and peace. Yet, as we look back at this prophecy of a Messiah, we see Jesus as the light shining in darkness.

*The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of deep darkness, upon them hath the light shined.*

*For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it with judgment and with justice from henceforth even for ever. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will perform this.*

It was an eighty mile trip one way. Even on a fast donkey the going would be slow for Mary and Joseph, even more so with a pregnancy near full term. It could be worse, because, after all, it was a state highway that ran from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The Roman empire might have been oppressive, but they knew how to build roads, in no small part to facilitate the movements of its armies.

Luke tells us the holy family went to the town of Bethlehem, the city of David and hometown of Joseph. The emperor had called for a census. If Joseph had gone to the town clerk for a hardship exemption, I expect he would have been told, “I don't care if your wife is pregnant, get your ... donkey to Bethlehem.” The fact is a census under Roman rule was not just a counting of people. It was more like a town's reassessment, a means by which all homes are evaluated to see if any have added some features that will increase its value and thereby raise the town's tax revenue. A Roman census was as much an inventory of wealth to be taxed as of people to be numbered.

Historians are hard put to find a census in the era of which Luke writes. Fact checkers will take pause, but as we saw during Advent, Luke's purpose is to portray Jesus, including his birth, as taking place right in the midst of the social and political reality of the day. So, it is likely not by accident, we can sense a bit of irony that Roman power and authority have paved the road to enable God's savior to be born in Bethlehem, and fulfill prophecy.

The birth of Jesus took place in this time, and in this way (Luke 2:1-7, KJV):

*1 And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.*

*2 (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)*

*3 And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.*

*4 And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)*

*5 To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.*

*6 And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.*

*7 And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.*

Much of Luke's account of Jesus' conception and birth foreshadow his ministry to follow. The lack of a decent room, the humility of being placed in a manger, an animal feed trough, and the less than favored and often suspect shepherds being the first visitors, are all predictive of Jesus' alignment with the poor and disenfranchised, the ritually unclean and socially outcast.

Let us now hear Luke's account of the angels' announcement to the shepherds, the shepherds decision to go to Bethlehem, and their willingness to share the good news they saw and heard. Luke 2:8-20:

*8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.*

*9 And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.*

*10 And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.*

*11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord.*

*12 And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.*

*13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, 14 Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*

*15 And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.*

*16 And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.*

*17 And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child.*

*18 And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.*

*19 But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.*

*20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.*

When I was young, my father and mother would create a scene in which we three children would pose for the annual Christmas card. I expect this took place around Thanksgiving, giving my father time to develop the black and white film and have the cards printed. We each have and treasure copies of those cards. I actually recall the year the picture was of each of us holding a wrapped gift. Once the photo shoot was completed, I wanted to open the package, and I was allowed. To my horror, the box was empty; perhaps, I was too young to know what a prop was. I've carried the wounds of that experience with me my whole life; well, that's not true, though at the time there was quite a bit of trauma.

Some people who do a similar thing when they wrap a gift in a small box, and then place it inside progressively larger boxes, each of which is wrapped, but with no additional gift. It is a bit like a Russian doll, but one has to unwrap and check each box until one finds the single gift at the end. My apologies if I have thwarted the surprise factor for anyone who has planned this for tomorrow. I've never done it because it seems a costly waste to use that much wrapping paper. In addition, I think the small gift at the end needs to be something like a diamond, and I am too cheap – I mean, too thrifty – to go that route.

This year, I have thought about Jesus' birth story with the idea of unwrapping a series of empty packages that may hide the Christ child of God's intent. As I wrote in last week's newsletter, I believe we are challenged to peel away centuries of misleading or false doctrines and beliefs so we can rediscover the Messiah anticipated two millennia ago. Let me offer three of those large packages that are neatly wrapped, but might not really be gifts.

The first big empty box I find contains what I call the Jesus of limited warranty. It is the Jesus of a world view that says there should be some guarantee or payoff for believing in him. We buy into this warranty Jesus when we say or think, "I know life is not without struggle, but I expect my faith to make it so there's not too much struggle, too much pain, too early a death." Such an idea of a faith insurance, warranty-giving Savior makes us think if we buy in, we can expect good service, a good life. Bad service, we change companies, or just live without. Some in the church sell such policies and guarantees, with the catch that if something goes wrong, you must not have paid your premiums. Non-believers often assume we've bought into the warranty Jesus and challenge us by asking, "Where is your God when you need help?", or "How could your God allow that tragedy?," or "What difference does your Jesus make?" God sent a savior, not warranty protection from life's struggles or disasters. I'm going to peel away and discard the wrappings of a warranty Jesus.

The second empty box I find needs unwrapping contains a ticket to heaven Jesus. This gift says, just believe in Jesus and you will receive a guaranteed reservation for eternal life. Here again, the church has promoted a kind of exclusive membership club view of God's salvation in Jesus. I think that mimics American Express' tag line, "Membership has its privileges." Now, I have nothing against eternal life, but I have not chosen to follow Jesus thinking it gives me a limited edition ticket to the hereafter. Perhaps I take the angels' words to the shepherds too literally, *Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people*. I like the "all people" emphasis, and I leave it to God to figure out any basis on which heavenly entry might be restricted. I'm going to peel away and discard the wrappings of a ticket to heaven Jesus.

A third box we find to unwrap is the incarnational Jesus. This one is tricky, because we can't completely discard it. Still, we find we have to sort through and sift out layers of doctrine placed upon the idea of Emmanuel, God with us, in the flesh. Perhaps because I have a fairly rational, reasoning, scientific mind, I struggle with beliefs that defy biology just to sustain a doctrine such as a literal virgin birth. Rather than insisting on the facts of incarnation, I think the church does better to marvel at the mystery of a God who desires to come so close as to live with humanity. So, I'm not going to peel away and discard all the wrappings of the incarnational – God in the flesh – Jesus, just those parts that seek to make me believe facts or doctrines that can actually mask God's mysterious and joyful desire to be present to us in Jesus.

I think it sometimes takes a child to help us peel away the false wrappings that can hide the heart and spirit of the gift we receive tonight. For me, the gift is a God, coming to us as a child, who wants to be with us – Emmanuel, God with us.

As was the baby Jesus, children are born vulnerable and dependent. As they begin to walk and speak they gain a bit of independence but maintain an innocence. Before long they will begin to mimic the tendencies, biases, and reasonings of adults and peers, some good and some not. Yet, before that, there is that wonderful in between age in which a child's innocence is accompanied by a pure, untainted honesty.

I was reminded of this in an article by a young pastor who wrote of her son asking honest questions, such as "when people use guns, did they forget about God?" and "how do we know God is real?" She says, "when he prays, it is from the heart. He is grateful, and hopeful, and endlessly compassionate....[and] right now, my child is saving my ministry." She explains: "When ...church programs fail, when church members exhibit the worst parts of their human nature, when I see the people who are supposed to be following Jesus running blindly after the ways of the world – I focus on the 10-year-old disciple at my dinner table, [who is] thanking God for family and sunshine and home; praying for friends who are sick; teaching the neighbor kid that sin is just part of how the world is but that Jesus came to break its power and give us hope." ["The Disciple at My Dinner Table, by Amy Morgan, as read online at: <http://nextchurch.net/4730-2/#.VoNUGLYrlsY>]

Children have an uncanny and sometimes disconcerting ability to call us to faithfulness, or challenge our commitment. They can look out car windows and see homeless people and believe we should to stop to help...right now. We figure out a good reason not to – no time, not safe, they don't want help.

Children have an innocence that wonders why people are mean to other people, or nations go to war, and have the gall to believe people and nations can change. We bring them up to speed with our wisdom that some people and nations will never change.

A child may hear about or see images of refugees fleeing war and brutality, and suggest there is an extra bedroom in the house where they could stay. Many of us have no counter to the claim though we know we will not embrace it.

Sometimes it takes a child to lead us to the manger, to find the heart of Jesus, not the doctrine of the church, nor the excuses of the culture. People say, Christmas is for children. Usually a line offered about the gift giving, stocking opening, and Christmas light aspect of the holiday, I also think we might be wise to take a child with us to the manger.

I believe it sometimes takes a child to point out when we hve filled our lives with big packages of dark reality that overwhelm the hope of this night. Sometimes, it takes a child to hold the light for us on dark roads in a violent world, knowing it is critical we reach the manger. Sometimes it takes a child to remind us the Jesus we find was called the Prince of Peace. Sometimes it takes a child to not only approach Jesus' manger with childlike wonder, but to see in the Christ child the faces of the homeless and hungry, the refugee and lonely.

In concluding her article about her son saving her ministry, that young pastor wrote, "When I feel like I'm doing everything wrong, I look at my son and am reminded of how much God is doing right." [Ibid.]

Friends, what we celebrate tonight is God's decision long ago that, "Sometimes, it takes a child." It is us to us, even today, to decide whether we will receive the child as a gift or an empty package.