

Christmas 2019

Emmanuel, remind us of your presence throughout the year, as sometimes we lose sight, we forget, and we feel alone, lost and forsaken. Remind us of your birth, your life, your death and your resurrection, as we walk the journey of our own lives. Remind us that we do not walk this journey alone. In the name of Christ, the Light of the World, the Incarnate God, we pray. Amen.

I came across a Christmas sermon from the Presiding Bishop. No, it was not from Bishop Curry but Bishop Browning and he wrote it in 1996. He told this story:

“I have a friend who is a priest in a church in a poor neighborhood. Life is hard there, and the congregation is poor. Lots of things in the building don't work. They must do without many things other churches take for granted. There is no money for a full-time secretary, so volunteers have to help run the place. Several of the volunteers come from a neighborhood drop-in center for the mentally ill homeless. Some of them battle substance abuse. Some of them have other illnesses. One of them, though, tugs at my friend's heart in a special way. He came to the center from a long period of incarceration. The crime for which he had been imprisoned was a violent one. He himself says that his sentence was fair. Shut away from society for many years, he came face to face with his own weakness and sin and turned his life around. He began to work closely with the prison chaplain. He began to feel valued, for the first time in many years. Maybe for the first time ever. The chaplain saw that he was intelligent, and talked to him

about his future just as if he had one. And the man began to believe that he did have one, did have a future. He signed up for a college course that was offered at the prison. He did well. He took another course. And another. And he earned a college degree. All as an inmate.

Finally, he had served his sentence and was released. He had nowhere to go and nothing to do. He was referred to the drop-in center. He eats his meals there. At night, he goes to a church shelter and sleeps on a cot. He spends his days at the public library, reading. And at the church, volunteering. He reconciles the petty cash. He reads the lesson in the service. He answers the phone. He helps run the food pantry. He does whatever is needed. He is my friend's right hand.

He sends out resumes for jobs he finds listed in the paper. He is honest, in his cover letters, about where he got his education and why. My friend helps him with the letters. They are good letters. But no prospective employer calls him for an interview. He is not stupid. He knows that nobody ever will.

He tells my friend that he works very hard not to be bitter. "People are afraid of criminal records," he says. "I know it is not personal." Over and over again, though, he is not given the chance to show the world that he has grown from his

own experience, that he has learned life's lessons the hard way. Over and over again, the world tells him that there is no forgiveness.

I heard about this man, who faces a hard world every day, who knows of his own hardness, and repents of it, who knows the need for forgiveness, who knows what it is to be in chains. I think of his determination not to be discouraged, and I think of what that must cost him, day after day after day. I can see why my friend is moved by his condition: it is certainly not innocence we see in his story, but we do see longing for forgiveness, longing to join the human family as a valued member. Longing to live”.

Now, there are many here tonight that cannot personally relate to this story. I can because one of my children did spend time in prison. Not for a violent crime, but due to drugs. He served his time and has struggled, just as this gentleman has struggled, to find employment. My son is a committed family man and has married in the last few years. He will do everything he can to support his family but often due to his past history, he is not given the chance. I also knew many homeless veterans who were in similar situations. Some looking for a chance. Others looking for forgiveness.

These are strong people dependent on others to have a chance for survival. Yet they were adults not infants. Adults who found themselves dependent on others for survival based upon actions or decisions that they had made. Infants are innocent by nature yet still depend on others for everything.

Even in our technologically advanced civilization today, infant mortality remains a major concern. One would think that the United States would have the least mortality rate for babies. Recent statistics show that 5.8 per 1,000 babies die within the first year of life. France is lower at 3.2/1,000. Afghanistan, by comparison, is at 110.6 per 1,000 births.

In the time of Jesus, estimates run as high as 30% of infants dying with the first year. Maybe not all that surprising with conditions such as they were. We tend to look at the birth and childhood of Jesus as a sure thing. Of course, we have history on our side.

The question that came to mind and I had to research, was why Mary went with Joseph in the first place? After all only males were required to register. First and foremost was God's Will. For Scripture to be fulfilled, Mary needed to go to Bethlehem. It was certainly not socially acceptable for an unmarried couple to be travelling together, let alone when a pregnancy was involved. This may mean that

Mary was no longer welcome at home and had nowhere else to go. Maybe Mary or Joseph was told what they should do in a dream. We don't know for sure.

In a straight line, Bethlehem was 69 miles from Nazareth. In actuality, Mary and Joseph would have walked much more than that. Regardless of the route taken, the approximately 100-mile trip would have taken them 8-10 long days of walking. This must have been a scary journey for young, pregnant Mary. Anyone who has been 8-9 months pregnant, would know that riding on a donkey, although kinder on the legs, would also not have been all that comfortable.

We look at the manger scene with Joseph standing resolutely looking down at Jesus, and Mary possibly kneeling in adoration next to the clean manger. Often, Jesus is portrayed wearing nothing but a diaper cloth. It seems as though, with our portrayal of the scene, Jesus would not have lived very long at all.

Writer Sarah Bessey stated; "If more mothers were pastors or preachers perhaps the beautiful creche scenes of Christmas wouldn't be quite so immaculate. We wouldn't sing songs of babies who don't cry. "Others have said that it appears obvious that a man wrote the story of the birth of Jesus.

We look at the Nativity story with a lot of Faith and hindsight. We take a lot for granted. In reality, the journey would have been arduous and very uncomfortable

for Mary. Whether the manger scene took place in a barn, a cave, or the first floor of a house; they were surrounded by animals and straw. Maybe there was a midwife available who came to help. If not, Joseph would have helped as best he could. Jesus would have been wrapped in swaddling clothes to comfort him. And placed in a feeding trough. The scene would have been as messy as we imagine it was. None of this bode well for the survival of the infant Jesus, under normal circumstances. Of course, God had plans and was in control.

Jesus, the Word of God; Jesus both man and God; was weak and vulnerable.

Totally dependent on Joseph and Mary just as any other infant.

Luke tells us that an angel appeared to a group of shepherds to tell them that an ancient promise had been fulfilled. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people," proclaimed the angel (v. 10).

God's promised return was happening, but in a way that no one expected. God was not returning as a conquering hero, a glorious warrior coming back to destroy Israel's enemies. No, the "sign" given to these shepherds was a leaky, burpy, dirt poor, little baby, born in a barn, in a nowhere town called Bethlehem.

The lyrics of the Christmas carol, "Hark! The Herald Angels Sing," say God and sinners reconciled.

This reconciliation echoes the words of the apostle Paul, who saw the arrival of Jesus, his birth, death and resurrection as the means by which God was “reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them” (2 Corinthians 5:19). For Paul, the birth of Jesus heralded the promise of peace promised to the shepherd Abraham long ago and to shepherds in a field outside Bethlehem. Because of Jesus, heaven and earth are at peace with one another. That is Good News!

We are to share that good news often. The “ministry of reconciliation” is the Christian mission, proclaiming God’s peace, God’s grace, and God’s new creation made possible in Christ to the whole world. Paul says; “For our sake he made him to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Corinthians 5:21).

This joyful message begins with a simple, normal birth, of a vulnerable child, with only a feeding trough in which to sleep. I love this story that is told by Douglas Ruffle, a Methodist missionary to Argentina.

“As a missionary in Argentina, I served Peace Community Church in Rosaria. It was an intimate community of faith. ...” He goes on to describe a local Christmas pageant put on by the local children. As Christmas pageants often go, there tend

to be surprises. He goes on; “The role of the innkeeper went to Facundo, a 12-year-old boy who had already grown to 6 feet tall. Facundo was the church caretaker’s son and lived in the rear of the property. While large for his age, he was gentle of spirit. All the children loved him.

With the music playing softly from the roof, Joseph led the donkey that carried Mary and stopped in front of the “inn” and knocked. Facundo opened the door and stood in the doorway. When he saw the donkey, and Mary sitting on it, his eyes grew wide. He had been given two lines, the first of which was: “There is no room in the inn.” Later he was to say, “We have a stable you can use.”

“Joseph” asked for a room, which was the cue for Facundo’s first line. Facundo kept looking at Mary on the donkey and said nothing. One could hear soft, nervous laughter coming from the audience. A prompter from behind the church door softly repeated Facundo’s line. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Facundo said his line aloud. Joseph insisted. “But we have come from a long journey, and my wife is due to have a baby.”

Facundo looked at the donkey that carried Mary and looked at Mary. The prompter whispered his line once again from the other side of the door. “There is no room in the inn,” repeated Facundo, this time with hesitancy. He stood in the

doorway watching. Joseph insisted again. “We are so tired; do you know anywhere we can stay?”

This was the cue for Facundo’s second line. ...

Facundo stood still, looking at the couple. Then he blurted out, “You can have my room!” pointing to the rear of the church property.

There was silence. Joseph just looked at Facundo and said nothing. It wasn’t supposed to have played out this way. If Facundo had said his lines correctly, Mary and Joseph would have gone to the end of the sidewalk in front of the church, where there was a “stable” prepared for them.

Finally, Mary broke the ice. “Okay,” she said. “That’s really nice of you.” She dismounted from the donkey. The caretaker led the donkey away, and Joseph and Mary went through the door of the “inn” to stay in Facundo’s room.

The audience burst into applause. The children took their bows. The pageant couldn’t have been scripted any better. Facundo stole the show and the hearts of the neighborhood. He had captured the meaning of Christmas, because he made room for the Christ child in his life.

—Adapted from Douglas Ruffle, *A Missionary Mindset: What Church Leaders Need to Know to Reach Their Community* — Lessons from E. Stanley Jones (Discipleship Resources, 2016).

As adults, we often tend to make things much more complicated than they are.

We want answers and explanations when the truth is already in front of us. God has fulfilled her promises in a way that we did not expect. In a setting of vulnerability and uncertainty. Yet powerful and glorious just the same.

Now we are to share this glorious news with all we meet. “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, * the Lord”. In the messiest times of our lives; when we feel the most vulnerable and alone; **God is with us!**

Amen! Alleluia!