

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

3rd Sunday of Advent
Year A

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December 20, 2015

Text: Luke 2:1-7

Title: “Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam: The Precious Memories of Christmas”

I sat with our great kitchen volunteers after Pat Behm’s funeral on Thursday. Family and friends had all filled their plates with the generous gifts provided by so many of you, and now it was our turn to eat and share. Someone at the table asked everyone else to share one childhood memory of a favorite Christmas gift. It didn’t take long for me to remember the 24 inch sting ray 5-speed bikes my brother and I received one Christmas. We were both shocked and overjoyed at the same time when we received them. Then I remembered how much he and I enjoyed the Erector set one year, so those two were probably tied for childhood favorites.

Someone else mentioned roller skates and around the table it went.

We have memories of Christmases past. Some are better than others. For some it’s all joy and surprise and excitement and meaning. For others, maybe not so much. Sometimes it’s just overwhelming during this time of year. When we couple the expectations we have for ourselves or the expectations others have of us with all the noise we hear from the voices of reporters and debaters who remind us of campaigns that raise our blood pressure no matter to whose point of view we are aligned, and the continued attempts of terrorists who to work at making us afraid as we prepare for the celebration of the Prince of Peace, we can find ourselves conflicted and stirred up. What are we supposed to do with all of it? Where do we find peace?

As I was driving down US10 this last week, the radio was playing some of the Christmas classics and I found myself drifting into thought about why this time of year affects us so. Why do the songs more than any time of year stir us so?

NEED

Every year Christmas songs remind us that we have a need for a Savior. We need only remind ourselves of recent events to know that the world still needs a savior: San Bernardino, Paris, Syria. Yet it’s not just national and international news that reminds us of our need for a savior.

James Moore who wrote the material for the small group study, “Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam”, reminds us of Charles Dicken’s, “A Christmas Story.” Who doesn’t know the story of Scrooge, the miserly and miserable counting house owner who shares with no one, and is about the most ungenerous person you could ever meet? Rude to his employee, Bob Cratchet, rude to his family, rude to everyone, Scrooge somehow lost the joy of what it means to be alive. However, his encounters with the

ghosts of Christmas past, present and future force him to see the truth about himself, force him to encounter the unconditional love of the Cratchet's whose disabled son, Tim, consistently offers the prayer, "God bless us everyone!" Though Scrooge consistently diminishes Cratchet, somehow the Cratchets consistently express grace to Scrooge and the experience with the ghosts force him to see himself for who he is in relationship to the grace extended to him over and over again.

And when he sees himself for who he is and discovers that the kind of grace expressed in the Cratchet family can be his, Scrooge becomes a new man. He is converted. Instead of being anti-Christmas, Scrooge becomes the man of the hour, giving lavish gifts to charity, to the Cratchets and showing up at his family Christmas dinner for the first time with a new lease on life. Scrooge somehow discovers what it means to love and be loved and it completely transforms him.

This is more than a nice well-written story. It reminds us every year that we still need a savior. We need a savior to keep us from giving way to the Scrooge in each of us and all of us. All of us are capable of Scrooge-like tendencies. Scrooge might say, "Okay everyone, life is about earning and keeping and earning some more. All for yourself. Protect only yourself and what is yours. Do this and you will live." But Christmas reminds us that the life God offers is one in which the angels sing "Glory to God in the highest and on earth, peace!" Christmas reminds us that the Savior has come in a vulnerable form in order to show that God want us to come close and not be afraid, that we too can love knowing that we are loved first. We need a Savior to show us that God does not want us to be separated from God which is what it means to sin.

HAVE

One of the reason we have rituals, repetitive seasons, is to assist our memory. We forget easily. Christmas is the repeated season that reminds us that we already have a Savior. We need one and we have one.

One of the ways we are reminded comes about in the powerful way the birth of Jesus is shared in the Gospel of Luke. Even those who aren't devout followers will come to worship on Christmas Eve to hear it, sing it. When I hear the angels' words to the shepherds once again--

"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, ^[a] the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³

--when I hear those words, I experience a quiet joy all over again. We have a Savior born an infant who would grow to be a man who brings the good news of God's desire to save the world. As the Gospel of John has it:

¹⁶"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. ¹⁷"Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

Jesus saves through feeding and healing and confronting the evil of demons that destroy lives, by challenging those who misrepresent God's ways, and by eventually giving his life to reveal how far God is willing to go to demonstrate how deep God's love for all people really is, deep enough to die for them.

Christmas reminds us that we need a Savior and that we have a Savior.

SHARE

Another beautiful part about the reminders we experience this time of year is the reminder that we can share the Savior. We may talk about and experience the stresses of the season with all the expectations that come with it, but there is also a difference in people. Maybe it's the built in expectation of giving and receiving that keeps the Scrooge at bay. Maybe it's those songs playing on our radios and in the stores that take us back to childhood memories that warm our hearts or to worship experiences of candles lit and singing Silent Night with faces all aglow. Maybe it's the time off to be with family and friends that give us life. Maybe all of these things have to do with sharing the Savior.

Whenever good will is extended to another person, whenever giving is a joyful expression of care for another person, whenever good news of God's love for someone is somehow expressed, then we both find the Savior and share the Savior. Christ is in the midst of such interchanges.

This last week Jenn and I were in the office and a woman entered. She was referred to the food pantry and had come to meet Sheila Miller. Turns out she is a mother of two teenage daughters, moved into a new home, recently separated, had lost her work and was having a very difficult time of things.

When Sheila arrived and the woman waited for her to collect the requested food, she was talking with Jenn and told her she was looking for work as a housekeeper. Jenn knew of someone who was hiring and give her a lead for a job. Then in the midst of the conversation and the waiting, a man came into the church looking to adopt a family for Christmas. I think Jenn told him we had already had our quota filled, but the waiting woman mentioned that she and her daughters weren't going to be having Christmas this year. The man told her that he would be willing to adopt them this year so they could. To follow all of that, the food pantry provided a Christmas basket for her and her daughters, as well.

As Melissa Grew, our food pantry coordinator, mentioned in an email about this last week:

Jesus helps at the right time, and AUMC was the right place for [this woman] and her family. She is so grateful.

We not only need a Savior, we have a Savior. Knowing this, we can share the Savior. It happens over and over again. All we have to do is pay attention. Opportunities abound for sharing the grace, mercy and love of God known in Jesus Christ.

So what are the memories that put you in touch with Jesus? What reminders do you need to remember that we need a Savior and that we have one? This Christmas, are there any unique ways in which you are sharing the Savior? Consider how you can be a witness to the One who has come to remind us that God invites everyone to the manger: diverse animals, disreputable shepherds, even mysterious kings. Everyone! "Good news of great joy to all the people!" It's a message we all need to hear and experience. So how will you share it this season?

After all when we claim to be followers of Jesus, we are called to share Him, not to keep Him to ourselves because His love doesn't work that way. It's the Scrooge in us that would keep us from sharing Him. The very nature of God's love in Jesus is to be passed on. When we witness it—as we did this week in the office and no doubt you have in other places and other people too—somehow we are more whole people. We KNOW without a doubt that Jesus was born and is born so that we might have life and have it abundantly which can lead us to sing with the angels,

*Glory to God in the highest
And on earth peace among those whom God favors!*