

December 24, 2016

“God Reached Out to Us in Jesus”

What is your favorite memory of Christmas? Some memorable moments of Christmas? For some it may be families gathering around a dinner table, or around a Christmas tree, opening gifts-- or singing Christmas carols. For some it may be visiting Rockefeller Center for the tree or seeing a Christmas Spectacular at Madison Square Garden or the Nut Cracker at a theater in the city. For still some, the favorite Christmas moments may be baking cookies in the kitchen and decorating a tree in the living room. Visiting our loved ones or having guests at home are wonderful memories too. Along with those delightful and joyful moments, you may have some memories of Christmas, which may not be so jolly, but meaningful, unforgettable and blessed.

When I was in college in Japan, the religious department of the school offered a Christmas service a few days before Christmas every year. It was held late in the afternoon. When I attended it with several friends of mine in a newly renovated chapel, there weren't many people sitting there. In fact there were only a few more in the pews. I remember the message the preacher shared with us on that day. He said:

The first Christmas was probably something like this. Although we do not know exactly the date when Jesus was born -- it may not necessarily be December 25 -- if it had been winter, autumn or spring, it must have been chilly and cold in a stable as we were feeling a bit cold in the chapel. The stable must have been dark at night as the light was dim in this chapel. Although the pictures of a manger scene in Christmas cards are pretty with lovely animals surrounding Mary, Joseph and Baby Jesus, the stable was probably full of earthy smells of animals and even their droppings -- nothing fancy and quite bleak as that chapel was. There were one or two poinsettias in the chapel...I don't remember ... but the chapel wasn't decorated as you might expect. It was quite barren, nothing fancy. People in the town of Bethlehem didn't know that Jesus was born. On the campus, many did not know that the Christmas service was being held.

Then the preacher said: the message of Christmas is simple. Anyone can preach it. Jesus, our Savior, was born in a dark stable to be the light to the world, to be a friend to everyone—those who are walking in darkness, those who are suffering, those who are neglected, those who are lonely, those who are marginalized, those who are poor. For that purpose, God did not choose a warm beautiful palace for his birthplace, but chose a dark, chilly and lonely stable as the birthplace for his Son, Jesus, to reach out to all humanity.

When I was in Junior high school, my sister, who is 6 years older than I, and I learned of something about our family that had not been told to us before. Now that the family secret was out, there were many tears shed, hurtful words exchanged and sadness and bitterness permeated our family.

It was close to Christmas. I don't remember any excited moments of opening or receiving gifts on that Christmas ...but I do remember what I found on the kitchen table on that Christmas morning.

I was the first one who woke up on that morning. There may have been some bitter exchange of words I had heard on the night before. My heart felt heavy. I went to the kitchen. On the table was a drawing my sister had done with colored pencils. It was like an acronym of words but she used pictures. When I put together those several pictures she had drawn, they became a message. It said, “From a penniless Santa Clause.”

My sister was in college and didn't have much money but she had placed something small wrapped as a gift where each of the family used to sit at the table. Even though there was disconnect, hurt feelings and sadness, my sister reached out to every person in our family and showed that she cared.

This is what Christmas is all about – reaching out with love. God first reached out to us by sending Jesus to earth so that we might know who God is. God gave us Jesus as God's greatest gift as John 3:16 says: God so loved the world that God gave God's only Son so that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have life eternal. God became human in Jesus so that we might know how much God loves us. It is a simple and powerful message of love, but it might still be a hard sell today.

There is a story of a man who did not believe in Christmas. Some of you may have heard it before, but let me share it with you tonight.

Once upon a time, there was a man who looked upon Christmas as a lot of humbug. He wasn't a Scrooge. He was a very kind and decent person, generous to his family, upright in all his dealings with other people. But he didn't believe all that stuff about an incarnation – God became human, which churches proclaim at Christmas. And he was too honest to pretend that he did.

"I am truly sorry to distress you," he told his wife, who was a faithful churchgoer. "But I simply cannot understand this claim that God became human. It doesn't make any sense to me."

On Christmas Eve, his wife and children went to church for the midnight service. He declined an invitation to accompany them. "I'd feel like a hypocrite," he explained. "I'd much rather stay at home. But I'll wait up for you."

Shortly after his family drove away in the car, snow began to fall. He went to the window and watched the flurries getting heavier and heavier.

"If we must have Christmas," he reflected, "it's nice to have a white one." He went back to his chair by the fireside and began to read his newspaper.

A few minutes later he was startled by a thudding sound. It was quickly followed by another, then another. He thought that someone must be throwing snowballs at his window.

When he went to the front door to investigate, he found a flock of birds huddled miserably in the snow. They had been caught in the storm and in a desperate search for shelter had tried to fly through his window.

"I can't let those poor creatures lie there and freeze," he thought, "but how can I help them?"

Then he remembered the barn where the children's pony was stabled. It would provide a warm shelter. He quickly put on his coat and boots and tramped through the deepening snow to the barn. He opened the door wide and turned on the light.

But the birds didn't come in.

“Food will bring them in,” he thought. So he hurried back to the house for bread crumbs, which he sprinkled on the snow to make a trail into the barn. To his dismay, the birds ignored the bread crumbs and continued to flop around helplessly in the snow.

He tried shoing them into the barn by walking around and waving his arms. They scattered in every direction...except into the warm, lighted barn.

“If only I could be a bird myself for a few minutes, perhaps I could lead them to safety,” he thought.

Just at that moment the church bells began to ring. He stood silently for a while, listening to the bells pealing the glad tidings of Christmas. Then he sank to his knees in the snow.

“Now I understand,” he whispered. “Now I see why **You** had to do it.”

The veil of disbelief lifted from his mind as at last he understood God’s heart towards humankind.

Christmas is about God reaching out to humankind with the message of love. Now God wants us to reach out to others with the same message of love -- not just in the Christmas season but in all seasons.

Let us take the message of Christmas of God’s love in all seasons.

A blessed Christmas to you all. Amen.