

Isaiah 62:6-12
Titus 3:4-7
Luke 2:(1-7)8-20
Psalm 97

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Finding God's Love in Strange Places

Tonight we set our daily worries and cares aside for just awhile as our hearts are warmed and softened by the retelling of this most miraculous story of Jesus' birth we know so well. We rejoice as we sing our favorite carols and pray our most heartfelt prayers. We enter into the sublime beauty of this sacred space as we experience a bit of heaven here on earth this night.

We need Christmas more than ever. Our nation and the world are mired in an angry and anxious morass of deep division and bitter alienation. Reading the papers, online newsfeeds or watching cable news it is easy to become depressed, disheartened and cynical with the way of the world today. In the midst of all this uncertainty we need to be assured that our lives have a purpose. We need to know our lives matter and that they matter to God. Most of all, we need to hear how much God loves us no matter how imperfect our lives are or how many times we have made a mess of things. We need to hear, "I love you." This is the very heart of the Christmas message.

As the shadows of Advent recede the dawn of the Light of Christ bursts into the world to scatter the darkness of sin. We gather together to celebrate God's love breaking into the world and into our lives in a most unusual and mysterious way – with the birth of a helpless infant in a smelly stable to a poor young peasant girl with no home or no husband. And, it is lowly, poor shepherds who are chosen to witness this miracle of miracles. Not exactly the grand entrance you would expect for the King of Kings, the Prince of Peace. But, isn't this the way God works, appearing in the lives of those who live on the margins, the poor, the invisible and the most vulnerable – those in most need of a miracle.

God's love comes to us in a most humble and fragile way. Out of love and the greatest humility God empties himself into a tiny newborn, the one we know as Jesus, made of flesh and blood, just like you and me. Since that holy birth God's love continues to come into the world, often in ways we cannot anticipate. Are our hearts open to receive this divine invitation of love? Dare we take the risk to believe that God's promise of a new life, a new way of being in this broken world, is possible? As Mary knows only too well, for God all things are possible.

When we reach out to another in love, something happens. We open ourselves to be loved and forgiven by God simply because God loves you and me beyond anything we could imagine. This divine love connects and binds us to one another. We are brothers and sisters in Christ, God's beloved children. But, it all begins with our willingness to reach out with an open heart – sometimes a pretty scary thing to do.

I heard this story on the radio, NPR's Story Corps, a few days ago.¹ A man, whose name is William, recalls Christmas Eve in 1967. He was a teenager living in Knoxville, TN and he was walking along the road when he sees a boy riding a bicycle. He thought, "Boy, that looks like my brothers' bike." When he got home he asked his younger brother, Wayne, where his bicycle was. He said it was on the front steps of the house. They checked and it was gone. After walking through the neighborhood the two brothers were able to find where the boy lived. It was an old shack in the back alley with no lights on. Full of anger they had intended to beat up this pint-sized bike thief but their father was nearby and he told his sons, "Just be quiet and let me do the talking." Their father knocked on the door of the shack and an elderly man who walked with a cane opened the door. The shack was dark and cold inside. There was only one candle that provided some dim light. William and Wayne learned that the little boy who stole the bicycle was the old man's grandson. The little boy and Wayne were both 10 years old. Then the little boy began to cry and said "I just wanted something for Christmas." They got Wayne's bike and brought it home.

William's father tells his mother and she doesn't say anything. He watches his mother cut their turkey in half and divide up all the side dishes. While she is packing up the food his father went to the coal yard to get a large bag of coal. His father asked Wayne, 'You've got another bike, don't you?' His brother said 'Yeah.'" So the two brothers and their dad go back to the unlit shack in the alley. This time they bring the wrapped food, the large bag of coal and Wayne's bicycle.

William remembers so clearly, "The little boy is just crying, but the thing that moved me the most was the old man. My father gave him \$20, which was a huge deal back then, and said, 'Merry Christmas.'" The old man said thank you and then he began to weep. William said, "My father was a chauffeur, my mother was a domestic, so we didn't have a lot of stuff. And that Christmas, I don't even remember what gift I got, but I do know that made me feel better than any Christmas I've ever had." Christmas is God's way of saying, "I love you." When we share God's gift of love we are changed by this love and we never see the world quite the same way. We are all united as God's beloved children. And, together, we become part of the miracle of Christmas.

Merry Christmas to you all this most holy night. Amen.

¹https://www.npr.org/2017/12/15/570806606/on-christmas-eve-a-stolen-bicycle-and-a-lesson-in-giving?utm_source=facebook.com&utm_medium=social&utm_campaign=npr&utm_term=nprnews&utm_content=2044, last accessed on 12/21/2017.