

Luke 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

Luke 2:15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

THE CHRISTMAS CARD

I love Christmas cards. Each year there is a card that touches me in some way. And there is one that stands out above all the rest.

I got this card maybe 20 some years ago. I had just moved to a church in North Carolina, and a friend from Virginia who was hoping for a child sent us this card. [Read from the card.]

“This has been an ordinary summer and fall until last month when we found out that I’m pregnant. I’ll be so glad when the nausea passes. Other than that it’s been a really special time.

My due date is July 11. At last I have some news to tell!

We are really excited, as you can guess and are already in love with this child.

I hope that your family has a special Christmas season. It is such a blessing to know the Lord Jesus Christ and to celebrate his birth with fellow believers.”

After all these years it still does me good to read that card.

Knowing Lynna and her warm caring nature, I can almost hear her speaking as I read the words. For me the joy leaps off the page.

I can still hear my wife squealing with delight when she first opened the card. (Only women do this by the way. That high pitched squeal that tells the guys in the room, look out. Something big is about to happen.)

THE GOOD NEWS OF BIRTH

I guess that's why this card has become so important to me. It's not only about the good news we heard from a friend. It's also about the good news I've heard in my own life.

I remember when we first learned that we were going to be parents. Good news, unto you a child is born; unto you a daughter (and then a son) is given.

There weren't any angels in our story. But, our story somehow seemed miraculous too. Nothing would ever be the same again.

Last Sunday we talked about how the birth of a child can change things. Irresponsible and self-centered people become more mature. Serious adults make funny faces and silly sounds in an attempt to get a smile from the little baby.

HUMAN AND DIVINE

My mom used to say that when you had a child God allows us to participate in creation. There is something divine about having a baby.

Maybe that's why almost everyone seems to enjoy Christmas. Every birth is a deeply human story that seems to point toward something greater than our own little lives.

What mother doesn't know what it means to be "great with child" and ponder in her heart what might happen to this child that will soon be born?

What father doesn't know that awkward feeling when the nurse hands you this little bundle of joy and says, "Congratulations daddy."

And you think, "Is that woman talking to me? How can this be?"

In birth, a very human experience that occurs many times all over the world every day of the year, there is still great mystery. There is a sense of joy and hope that transcends the evil madness that seems to have invaded our world.

CHANGE AND CHILDREN

No matter what we believe when we look into the face of a child we come to the same conclusion. We have to change.

We have to do better for our children. In this child God has touched the world. This child is holy. We have to change.

And that is true. We do have to change. We have to care more about our children's future than our own future.

And yet, we know that the forces arrayed against the future of our children are great.

The world as described in the Christmas story should sound familiar. The people struggled to pay their taxes. The poor do not find a place to stay for the night. The government is indeed their shoulders.

And this little child, this divine sign of hope and peace is wrapped in rags and laid in a cattle trough.

The good news is wrapped in misery and suffering. The power of God is displayed in what must have seemed like the darkest corner of the earth.

It was not what anyone expected.

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

That brings me to my second favorite Christmas card. It's the one that contains a poem by Dr. James Alan entitled, "One Solitary Life." The guest speaker reads it each year at the Disney Candlelight Processional.

In essence it describes all the things that Jesus didn't do. He was born to peasant woman in an obscure village.

He didn't write a book.

He never held public office.

He didn't travel far from home.

His life seemed to end with a shameful death on a cross.

But, the poem concludes,

"Nineteen centuries have come and gone
And today Jesus is the central figure of the human race
And the leader of mankind's progress

All the armies that have ever marched
All the navies that have ever sailed
All the parliaments that have ever sat
All the kings that ever reigned put together

Have not affected the life of mankind on earth
As powerfully as that one solitary life."

NO MERE MAN

Napoleon Bonaparte once reflected on the life of Christ.

Napoleon of course institutionalized the reforms of the French Revolution and was one of the greatest military commanders of all time.

You might not agree with his methods, but one thing is sure. Napoleon knew what it meant to affect the course of history. This is what he said about Jesus.

"I know men and I tell you that Jesus Christ is no mere man.

Between him and every other person in the world there is no possible term of comparison. Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I founded empires.

But on what did we rest the creations of our genius? Upon force.

Jesus Christ founded His Empire upon love; and at this hour millions of people would die for Him."

The wonder of the Christmas story is not just the wonder normally associated with the birth of a baby. As Napoleon put it, Jesus is no mere man.

God was in Christ.

This birth was more than good news for one family long ago. This birth was good news for the human family in all times and places.

It is a story about power.

But it is not a story about the power of force.

It is a story about the power of love, God's love.

LEON

Someone sent me a Christmas email this week. It told the story of a man who was decorating for Christmas.

One of his decorations was some huge lighted plastic letters that spelled out the Christmas message, NOEL.

But, the weather was cold and rainy, and this man didn't quite get the letters in the right order. In fact, he reversed them.

So, when the sign was lit that night the man's Christmas decorations spelled out in huge lighted plastic letters, "LEON."

The pastor playfully suggested that if a man by the name of Leon happened by this careless Christmas scene he might have said,

"Wow, he did that just for me!"

FOR THE WORLD

Of course the Christmas Noel is not just for Leon.

But, Leon is included and so are we! The message is for everyone. It is for the world.

God so loved the world that he sent his Son into the world. (John 3:16)

Just as God sent angels to tell shepherds in the darkness, "Don't be afraid. God is on the way" so God comes to us in our darkness this evening and tells us the same thing.

"Don't be afraid. God is on the way."

It's hard to imagine how much love God has for the world. The Apostle Paul tried in his letter to the Ephesians when he talked about the height and depth and breadth and length of God's love. (Ephesians 3:18)

But, how can you measure what is immeasurable?

There are some truths so deep, so profound that the only way to convey them is through the power of stories and symbols.

That's what tonight is all about.

We retell the old, old story, but we remember that it applies to you and me, here and now.

We light candles, and shout for joy in song.
We imagine that the Christmas Noel is a message for us as well as shepherds that were watching their flock at night so long ago.

It is a time for us to fall on our knees and hear the angel's voices. It is a time for us to know that this night is holy. It is the night of our dear savior's birth.

KISSING THE FACE OF GOD

Let me close with one more Christmas card image. This is where I get the title for my sermon this evening, "Kissing the Face of God."

On the front of the card is a painting of a realistic looking Mary kissing her child.

Morgan Weistling, the artist who painted this image was inspired by a phrase from a song and a photograph portraying Mary and her child in what she called a "scene of real human tenderness."

Carrollyn received the card from her aunt, and on the back of the card I noticed this statement,

"Donations received for these cards help Covenant House provide shelter, food, clothing, medical care and support services—seven days a week, 24 hours a day—to homeless and runaway youth."

That seems appropriate. We meet God; we touch God in the face of real human need. And God in the form of a helpless infant smiles and touches us back.

The Bible tells us this is true. Jesus once said that when we do the smallest deed of kindness in his name, it's as if we did it for him. (Matthew 25:31-46)
When we tenderly kiss another it can be as if we kiss the face of God.

SEE FOR THEMSELVES

The Scripture tells us that when the shepherds heard the message from the angels they wanted to go to Bethlehem and see for themselves this Savior that was born in a manger. So they went and found everything as the angels had told them.

They found Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in a feeding trough.

They told the holy couple the good news. And the Scripture tells us that Mary treasured these words and pondered all these things in her heart.

Can you believe it? God used the words of the shepherds to influence the life of the holy family.

It seems to me that God is still spreading the good news in this way. God calls us to go and see for ourselves. And God also calls us to go and proclaim the good news to anyone who will listen.

God asks us to imagine that the child born in poverty is his child. God asks us to believe that there is a light in this world that is greater than any darkness.

I know. It's hard to believe.

But, if, like Mary, we treasure these words and ponder them, we may find ourselves kissing the very human face of God.

We may find hope in the most unusual of places, even an animal's feeding trough in a little town called Bethlehem.

Amen.