

“IT’S BEGINNING TO LOOK A LOT LIKE CHRISTMAS!”

III – Candy Canes

Karen F. Bunnell

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Psalm 23

Luke 2:8-20

Last weekend, Mom, Susan and I did something we are wont to do every year. We got in the car and drove around looking at Christmas lights! This year, even though it was raining, we headed down to Chesapeake City to look at the lights and light displays they have all over town. It was absolutely beautiful. We also drove through some neighborhoods on the way to and from there and saw lots of houses beautifully lit up. We ended our tour over in Delaware not far from Susan’s son’s house, where there’s a house that is a veritable Santa land, and people come from far and wide to check it out. And yes, even in the rain that night, people were out and walking around admiring the display.

Like I said, we do this nearly every year, but I have to tell you why this year was different for me. It was actually because of something I said in my last sermon (which goes to show you that what I’ve always said, that when I preach I’m preaching to myself as well as you, is true!). And here’s what it was. That sermon was, if you recall, about Christmas trees, and in it I said that the lights shining on those trees represent the souls saved by Christ.

So, this year, when I looked at all of those beautiful lights shining brightly in all of those different places, I didn’t just think they were pretty. No, in my heart, I was thinking of the millions of souls saved by the One whose birth we are preparing to celebrate in just a couple of days.

You know what? That’s why I conceived this sermon series in the first place, in the hopes that thinking on the symbols of Christmas might help us more fully celebrate the birth of our Savior, and help us each grow in faith. So, we’ve considered bells, then Christmas trees, and finally today, candy canes.

Some of you may already know the legend of the candy cane. In fact, I know that some of you do, because I was with you last week at a circle dinner when you heard about it. But even if you do, I pray that you’ll hear it again with grace.

As was the case with the Christmas tree and how it began, there are several different stories about the origin of the candy cane – all of them pretty interesting.

One of them comes from the 1700s, where, in certain areas of Europe at that time, there was said to be a ban on public displays of Christianity. And no Bibles or crosses could be owned. One man found the oppression particularly distressing, and wanted to figure out a way to still be able to share the love of Jesus and the joy of Christmas with others. He was especially concerned about the children who weren't seeing nativity scenes and learning about the Savior's birth. As it happens, he was a candy maker, so he set about making candy that he could give to the local children as a gift, but also as a way to communicate the story of Jesus to them. That gift, of course, was the candy cane – and I'll tell you more about how it communicates the story of Jesus in a moment.

That's one legend. A second one comes from Cologne, Germany (this one will make Suzette smile!). It's about a man who was the choirmaster for a children's choir in the Cathedral at Cologne. Apparently during services one night, the children were growing restless and getting a little loud and noisy, creating quite a ruckus in the church, and they were not paying any attention to him as he tried to quiet them down. So, to keep them quiet, get this! He gave them a long, white, sugar candy stick. (Imagine giving sugar to children to quiet them down!) Oh, well.

Anyway, since giving chocolate and candy out at church was considered sacrilegious, the story goes that he bent the sticks to make them look like shepherds' staffs, since they were in a Christmas service, celebrating the birth of One visited by shepherds from the fields.

Finally, a third legend, which actually comes from the United States. The story goes that a candymaker from Indiana, wanted to make a candy that would be a witness to faith, so he incorporated several symbols for the birth, ministry and death of Christ into this piece of candy. He began with a stick of hard white candy, curved the end which formed the stick into an upside down J, and added red stripes, which is what the candy cane looks like to this day.

Well, no matter which legend you choose, they all do the same thing – point the way to the baby born in Bethlehem – and more particularly, remind us that He grew up to be the Good Shepherd of us all.

So, let me walk you through the symbolic meanings of the various parts of a candy cane. The first and most obvious is that it is the shape of a shepherd's staff.

But then, if you turn it upside down, it forms the letter "J" which stands for Jesus.

It's made out of hard candy, which reminds us that Jesus is our rock, dependable and strong – and I would add, it also brings to mind the rock, that is the church.

The white of the candy cane reminds us of purity, reminds us that Jesus was without sin.

The stripes show that “by his stripes we are healed,” and the fact that they are red reminds us that he shed his blood that we might live.

The distinctive peppermint flavor and scent is meant to remind us of the distinctive scent of the gifts the Wise Men brought to the baby Jesus – especially the frankincense and myrrh.

Wow, that’s a lot of symbolism for a piece of candy isn’t it? But just think about that first legend. If you weren’t able to publicly display religious items or even talk about your faith, a little thing like a candy cane passed from one friend to another would be a way to share one’s faith, to introduce someone to the shepherd of us all.

And oh, how people need to hear about that Shepherd. Oh people need to know that Shepherd. So this morning, I want to invite you to think about what you would say as you handed someone a candy cane and told them about Jesus.

The way I might do it is to tell them some stories. Like this one. One day, a woman by the name of Pat Livingston, was spending the afternoon with her little niece Claire. At one point, Claire brought out every single one of her stuffed animals and began to introduce them to Aunt Pat. She described each one in detail, telling all sorts of stories of what they had done, times they had been good, and the times they had been bad, and she had to spank them. She showed her the ones who she said “never went to bed on time.” It was quite a long process as Claire lovingly talked about each one of them.

A few days later, Pat’s sister who was Claire’s mother called her, and told her that the next morning after their visit, Claire had shown her mother a picture she had drawn of their family. She had drawn stick figures – one of whom had small circles on each side of its head. When her Mom asked Claire to explain who they all were – she said, “Here’s Dad, here’s you Mom, here’s me and Bobby (her brother) and this one is Aunt Claire.” “What are those things on Aunt Claire’s head?” her Mom asked her. “They’re ears,” Claire replied. “Aunt Pat really listens. That makes me feel special.” (*Stories for All Seasons*, p. 20)

There may not be a much better way to describe a shepherd than one who listens. A shepherd listens with his ears, his head, and his heart. He knows his sheep. He knows them so well that he can discern a normal bleating, or a cry of distress. He knows when they’re well or when they’re hurting. Like that little girl knew how much she mattered because of the attention Aunt Pat paid her, so too do

sheep know how much they matter because they know the shepherd knows every hair on their head.

Jesus, our Good Shepherd, knows us inside and out. He listens, he hears, he sees and understands every moment of our lives, every triumph, every trial. He hears and answers every prayer that we utter. And because he loves us so well, and knows us so well, we know we matter, that we're special.

Perhaps that something that someone you would hand your candy cane to needs to know today.

Or perhaps they need to know about a Shepherd who is a constant companion on the journey of life. Another story. There's a man named Derek Redmond, who was an Olympic athlete in the 1996 Olympics. For years and years and years he had practiced running the 400 meter race, with his father as his coach.

Finally, the day came, and it was time for his heat of the race. He lined up with the other runners, and when the starter pistol sounded, he took off with the rest of them, running like he had never run before. He was well ahead of the field, well on his way to victory, when suddenly his Achilles tendon snapped. He pulled up and stopped running, but didn't leave the race – instead, he began to limp his way around the track in agonizing pain. The crowd saw what was happening and stood and cheered him on, but the wound was so severe and the pain so great, he surely wouldn't make it to the end.

Then suddenly, a middle aged man appeared on the track next to him, put his arms around Derek's waist and helped him all the way to the finish line. It was his father!

When the race was over, and Redmond was talking to the press, he said, "He was the only one who could have helped me, because he was the only one who knew what I'd been through." (Tony Campolo, *Let Me Tell You a Story*, p. 16)

Maybe the one who you would give your candy cane to is struggling to finish their race. Maybe they've been hurt in some way, or tripped up by an injury or accident or something bad happening to them. Maybe they can't imagine how they'll go on.

They need to know about Jesus, the Good Shepherd, who, like that father, is always there, and knows what we go through – everything that we go through. And more than that, he knows human pain and suffering, because he suffered it too.

Finally, let me share one more thing you can give to someone else through your candy cane. I'll do it by way of another story – a strange little story from, of all

things, a Rose Bowl Parade from a number of years ago. If you've ever watched that parade, you know that hundreds of thousands of people line the route to look at magnificent floats made entirely of flowers. Float after float after float, literally come floating down the street to the delight of the crowds.

Well, this particular year, the parade came to a grinding halt, because one float lost power and coasted to a complete stop. The beautiful float was so big that it filled the street so that the bands and other floats behind it couldn't go around. Thus, the parade ground to a halt.

Technicians came running to try to figure out what was wrong, and they couldn't find anything mechanically wrong with it. They looked and looked and searched and searched, knowing the crowds were growing restless, when finally they discovered the problem – it had simply run out of gas! And the ironic thing about that is that the float was sponsored by one of the largest and most successful gas companies in the world! (James W. Moore, *There's a Hole in Your Soul Only God Can Fill*, p. 23)

While that's a funny story, what's not funny is that a lot of people find themselves at a point in life where they feel they've run out of gas. They're tired, hopeless, not certain of the future, feeling lost and alone. They so badly need one of your candy canes, to remind them that they have a Good Shepherd who specializes in seeking out the lost and lonely, and yes, those who have run out of gas, for whatever reason.

Remind them, when you hand them that candy cane, of the parable of that shepherd who left behind 99 sheep to search for the one who was lost. Remind them, that they can never wander out of the range of the Shepherd's heart and love. Remind them that the shepherd's staff not only pulls the sheep back into the fold, but back into the arms of the shepherd who dearly loves them and wants what is best for them.

Oh dear friends, a little piece of candy, formed in the shape of a shepherd's staff – what a wonderful reminder of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. And oh, how perfectly fitting it was that the first ones to visit him in his manger bed were shepherds themselves. No doubt, God on his throne was smiling!

Amen.