

“FAITH, FELLOWSHIP AND FIREWORKS!”

Karen F. Bunnell
Elkton United Methodist Church
December 24, 2011

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

It was the last shopping day before Christmas, and a man had yet to buy a present for his wife, so off he went to the local department store. He marched himself right over to the perfume counter, and said to the saleswoman, “I want to buy my wife some perfume for Christmas.” So the saleswoman reached under the counter and brought out a beautiful bottle of perfume, and said, “I know she’ll love this one.” “How much is it?” the man replied. “\$75.00.” “No way,” he said, “show me something that costs less.”

“Okay.” So she put that one back, and brought up another beautiful bottle of perfume. “How about this one? This is only \$50.” “Only \$50. Nothing doing. Show me something that costs less than that.”

“Okay, sir.” So she put that one back, and brought up a third beautiful bottle of perfume. “Okay, here you go. This one is only \$25.00.”

He still wasn’t satisfied, so he said to her, in exasperation, “Haven’t you got something cheap?”

She handed him a mirror!

That man had troubles! He was cheap and he waited too long to get his wife a Christmas present - not a good thing to do that close to Christmas day. But, in the scheme of things, his trouble was lightweight, compared to some of the troubles in the world today.

The newspapers and news broadcasts this week have been filled with news of troubles around the world. It’s almost too much to bear! A woman in Wilmington goes out to walk her dog, and ends up dead. A soldier from Maryland is killed in Afghanistan. Repeated stories about random home invasions! Unending stories about a bickering Congress getting nothing done. An economy that seems more like a roller coaster.

It is almost too much to bear, and those that I mentioned are just societal problems. Put on top of that the troubles with which each of us struggles. These are tough times - some say, tougher than any times before us.

I'm not sure I agree with that, because I think about times like the Great Depression, when family after family after family struggled to keep even a little bit of food on the table. And I think about times like World War I and World War II where hundreds of thousands of people died - when there were probably days when as many people died in one day, as died in the whole of the Iraq war.

Every age has its troubles, and it's not fair to say one is worse than any other. Why, there were even troubles way back in the days in which tonight's Gospel lesson took place. There were despotic rulers, there were people starving, there were people who were treated poorly, they needed help badly.

In the middle of this picture of struggle is a couple named Mary and Joseph. Nine months before that night, they were a couple of truly bewildered people. The lives that they had planned, were not to be. While they were a traditional couple looking forward to following the traditional path of betrothal, then marriage, then a home, then a family - the rug got pulled out from under them when an angel came to call, and told them that God had other ideas.

In faith, they agreed to follow Him. They agreed to trust Him, no matter the cost. They agreed to face whatever society thought of them, to take part in this wonderful saving adventure of God's. And so they did. We don't know exactly what happened to them, but I think it's safe to say they didn't have an easy road. Surely they faced unending questions about her growing pregnancy. Surely people whispered about them, and pointed to them. Surely it was hard.

And now, nine months later, a census has been called and they have to go to Bethlehem to be counted. Anybody here want to volunteer to ride a donkey through a dusty land nine months pregnant? It's hard to imagine how difficult that was for Mary to endure, and for Joseph to watch her bravely endure.

But they did it. They made the journey, and the end is in sight. All Joseph wants is to find a room in which his dear Mary can lay down. All he wants is to give her some relief. But door after door after door is closed in his face - "there's no room in the inn." There was no place for them. They were forced to bring the Savior into the world in a crude, rude, dirty, dusty, smelly stable - a place only fit for animals - because there was no room in the inn.

Friends, a lot of people arrive at Christmas this night, and there's no place for them either. Some, literally have no home tonight. They're sleeping in a shelter, or under a bridge, or in the woods.

And for some, there's no place in their family for them. Arguments, broken relationships, sibling rivalry - so many reasons that people find themselves outside of their families.

For others, there's no place for them in the work force. This Christmas finds so many people without jobs, without income, without insurance, without money for the basic necessities.

For still others, there's no place for them because they're sick. Everything good and familiar is gone. It's an endless round of doctor's appointments and procedures, and this Christmas, it feels like there's no place for them.

And yes, for some, there's no place for them in the church, or at least they think so. They're outside of here tonight, thinking we don't want them, thinking they don't measure up, or wouldn't be accepted, or doubt too much. Tonight, on this blessed Christmas night, they feel like there's no place for them in the church.

From the very first Christmas, to this very Christmas, the people of God have struggled with life's tough times. But there's good news! It's good news that began on that first Christmas night, when Christ the Savior was born, good news that is alive for us even this day! Actually there's a whole lot of good news!

The first bit of good news is that when Jesus came into our world, the darkness and sadness of life will never win. The light of Christ will never be overshadowed by the dark - never! You heard the lesson from the prophet Isaiah - "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined. Thou hast multiplied the nation, thou hast increased its joy; they rejoice before thee as with joy at the harvest, as men rejoice when they divide the spoil. For the yoke of his burden, and the staff for his shoulder; the rod of his oppressor, thou hast broken as on the day of Midian. For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government shall be upon his shoulder and his name will be called, 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'" (Is. 9:2-6)

Never again will evil ultimately win! Never again will sorrow and sadness have the final word! Never again will anyone be outside the embrace of God, without a place, without a home. Never again!

A woman in New Mexico was teaching her students that passage from Isaiah and she wanted them to really grasp it, so she found the deepest, darkest place on her school's campus and took the class there. It was two floors below ground level and it was an old racketball court, so there were not windows. When they got down there, she had them all sit down on the floor, and she said to the class, "you are people who live in a land of deep darkness," and then she turned the lights off. A few people gasped. It was totally and completely dark. Scary dark.

She left it that way for a few moments, a few very, very quiet moments. And then she said, "Those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has

shined.” And with those words, she struck a match, lit a little tiny single candle, and everything changed. They could see each other’s faces - some surprised, some puzzled, some even streaked with tears.

In a very effective way, she showed them what Christ showed all of us when God sent Him to us. That the light of His life and His love overcomes all darkness. His light, His life, His love will never be dimmed.

So if you’re struggling tonight with darkness, or struggling to find a place, know that, the light of Christ shines brightly, and the darkness will not overcome it.

A second bit of good news from Christmas and on Christmas is this: Because of Jesus, never again will we ever be alone. Perhaps the greatest fear we have is being alone - having no one to love us, no one to care for us.

A pastor one day went to visit one of his parishioners - a man named Bobby, who sadly was stricken with ALS - Lou Gehrig’s disease. Bobby had lost his ability to talk, and was using a speech device that enabled him to select and type words that the device would then reproduce with an electronic voice. So he was able to communicate that way with the pastor.

Well, that day, it was around Christmas, and Bobby showed the pastor pictures of his two children visiting Santa, and they talked about all kinds of things. Bobby’s mother was also there during the pastor’s visit and at one point the phone rang, and she went to answer it. While she was gone, the pastor took the opportunity to talk to Bobby a little more personally and compassionately. He said, “I can only imagine how hard this is for you.” Bobby nodded and began to tear up. By the time the mother returned, both Bobby and the pastor were crying. Then the pastor asked him, “What gives you comfort?” Immediately Bobby began to type, and within seconds, the electronic device pronounced a single, monotone word, “Company.”

Company. More than another, we want company. We don’t want to be alone. Because of Christmas, my friends, because of Jesus, we are never alone. Never, ever. Bobby’s pastor put it this way: “‘The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.’ John’s Gospel is clear. The darkness is not an illusion. It is there. It is real. We are always and ever in a battle with it. But we are not alone. The blessing of God Almighty is solidarity. It is presence. It is the light coming to be with us. It is, as Bobby, put it so quickly, ‘company.’”

The good news of Christmas, my friends, is first, that the darkness will never overcome the light of Christ, and secondly, that we are never, ever alone, we always have company - Jesus . . .

And finally, a third bit of good news is this: Because of Christmas, you and I never have to ultimately fear anything. Because of Jesus Christ, we can know the truth of the words that ring throughout the holy scriptures, "Be not afraid. Be not afraid."

So let me close with one final story.

In 1994 two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on Biblical principles) in the public schools there. One of the places they were called to teach was a very large orphanage.

Around Christmas time that year, they had the opportunity to tell the orphans the Christmas story for the very first time. They had never heard it. So they told them about Mary and Joseph going to Bethlehem, and there being no room in the inn, and Jesus being born and placed in a manger in a stable.

Well, they said, the kids were amazed and enthralled by the story. They hung on their every word. When they finished telling the story, they gave each child three small pieces of cardboard, so they could each make a crude manger. They also gave them each a square piece of yellow napkin - they didn't have any construction paper. They were tear that up and make it be the straw in the manger. They also were each given a piece of flannel, that could be used for Jesus' blanket. And then each one got a doll-like baby that had been cut out from tan felt.

Once they got all their materials, they went to walk, and the two instructors walked around to see how they were doing, and to see if anybody needed help. They came to one table and saw that one little boy, Misha, was already done with his project. They looked at it, and were surprised to see not one, but two babies in the manger. They asked the translator to ask Misha why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him, and looking at his manger scene, Misha began to repeat the story very seriously. He told the story just as he had heard them tell it, until he got to the part where Mary put Jesus in the manger. Then he started to ad-lib.

"And when Mary laid the baby in the manger (he said), Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?' And Jesus told me, 'If you keep me warm that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me.' So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with him - forever."

Because of Christmas, friends, because of Jesus, you and I have nothing to ultimately fear. Misha somehow knew that. This little child who had lost everything, parents, home, family . . . this little child who didn't think he had anything to give . . . found a home in Jesus, found a place, found the answer to his deepest longings.

That's what Christmas is about, dear friends. In Jesus we have a home, a place, the answer to our deepest longings. His light pierces the deepest darkness, His presence means we're never alone, His love is an answer to our deepest fears, and our deepest longings.

As we leave this place tonight, I want to remind you that there are so many who need to hear this great Good News. So many who still feel there's no place for them, so many still alone, so many struggling. They need to know Christ, they need to see His light, and know His love.

So I want to leave you with something to think about. If you've ever been to the fireworks, you know that once a firework is shot off from the ground, you first hear it, and then you see a single light fly straight up into the sky, all by itself. But then, in an instant, in an incredible moment, that single little light bursts forth into thousands of pieces of light, beautifully, majestically lighting up the dark sky.

Think of that single light as the light of Christ, and then think of all of us as those thousands of majestic lights shooting out into the dark sky. Tell the story, friends, share the good news of Jesus to those who are hurting. Be a light that shares the light of Christ! There's no better gift you can give this Christmas!

Amen.