

“ALL IS CALM, ALL IS BRIGHT”  
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Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

Many of you here know that about six months ago a new resident came to live at the church parsonage – a tiny little cat, who has the incredibly creative name of “Kitty.” Anyway, Kitty was abandoned at only a couple of weeks of age by her mother, and she was found where my niece works, and ended up as a member of the household.

Now, Kitty is no ordinary cat. Kitty is what I call “super-cat.” She can leap tall buildings in a single bound. I’m not kidding – she can go from the floor to the top of a bookshelf about a foot from the ceiling in two steps. Boom – she’s there!

She’s also incredibly smart and sneaky. She has a way of stealing things and stashing them away in hiding places. One night she took my niece’s keys out of her purse and hid them under a sofa!

The other night, I was putting up the Christmas tree, very warily I might add – not knowing how she would handle it, but for a while, it was going well. I’m no dummy, so I tied the tree to a hook on the wall – just in case she decided it was a toy! Anyway, it was going pretty well, she had circled the tree, and sniffed at it, and batted at the cheap ornaments I had put on the bottom – and then, she sort of sauntered away. So I kept on putting ornaments near the top, when all of a sudden, I looked down to the middle of a tree at what I thought was an ornament – instead, it was the cat – yes, in the midst of the tree with her head sticking out – and, if I didn’t know better – a smirk on her face! Like – what do you think of this?

She is something. I haven’t put a lot of other decorations around the house this year, because frankly, I wasn’t sure what would happen to them. But, in a moment of weakness and courage, I did put out my nativity scene. It’s in the living room, and it’s really beautiful, and I put it out with fear and trembling, not knowing what she would think of it. And I have to confess that, every morning, I look at it to make sure baby Jesus isn’t missing!

Which actually leads me to something I read about this week – something incredible! Do you know that every year, there’s actually a rash of baby Jesus being stolen from nativity scenes around the country? I must have been living under a rock, because I didn’t know it. But apparently it happens every year. Someone

comes along, for whatever reason, and steals the baby Jesus figure from nativity scenes. Sometimes it's because they're atheist and they want to ruin Christmas for the rest of us. Sometimes it's because they're pranksters and think it will be funny. I actually read about one baby Jesus that was stolen from in front of a family's home, only to be returned eight months later – complete with pictures of Jesus' adventures in that time – Jesus sitting on a bicycle, Jesus in someone's kitchen, Jesus at the beach, Jesus at Walmart.

One community in Florida actually put a GPS chip on their baby Jesus, and sure enough, when He was stolen, they were able to track down the culprit. And unbelievably, in Chicago, in a public nativity scene, baby Jesus is chained down so He can't be taken away. (On-line, Janet Hunt, "Stolen Baby Jesus," Dancing with the Word)

Well, people of Chicago, I've got news for you – you don't need to chain Jesus down – He can't ever be taken away. That's the good news of Christmas. Jesus is here, He is born, and no matter what the world tries to do, He can never be taken away!

It is a crazy world, but it was a crazy world over two thousand years ago when Jesus was born. The political powers that be were out of control, it was power versus power, and evil reared its ugly head. The ruler of the day called a census – for the purpose of taxation, no doubt – which is why Mary and Joseph had to make that trek to Bethlehem.

And that, of course, was only part of the chaos of their world. They had lived through the chaos of angel visitations, unexpected news, changed plans. They had endured, who knows what, from people around them. Now, in the last stages of her pregnancy, they have to make this difficult trip, and then they arrive, and there's no place for them to lay their heads. And then, she goes into labor. It keeps getting worse and worse!

Until He is born, and then everything changes. As the beautiful hymn says, "All is calm, all is bright." He came into the world, and everything changed.

Let me tell you about how one man came to understand that in a wonderful way. He was home one December afternoon with his four children while his wife went Christmas shopping. He was lying back on the couch, trying to stay awake, with one eye on a football game on TV, when the kids came up to him and said they wanted to put on a play for him. Well, he really didn't want them to, but he knew he needed to let them, so he did. He sat up and began to watch as his four kids – ages 4, 6, 8 and 10 years old began the show.

It was the Christmas story. The kids were Mary, Joseph, an angel, and a wise man. Joseph came in with a mop handle for a staff, Mary came in with a pillow under her pajamas making her look like she was with child, a third child was an angel, who came in flapping her arms like wings. And the fourth child – the eight year old girl – was the wise “man” who apparently had cleaned out all the jewelry boxes in the house, and was carrying her gifts to Jesus.

She turned and looked at her Dad and said, “I am all three wise men. I bring three precious gifts: gold, circumstance and mud.”

You know what? The father didn’t laugh, and didn’t correct his daughter. Because he realized she was right – that somehow she had gotten to the heart of the message of Christmas – “that God loves us for who we are: our gold – when we are at our best; our circumstances – where we might be even now; and even our mud – where we are when we are most human.” (On-line, Kenneth Carter, “Call and Response,” Day1.org)

God sent His only begotten Son right smack into the middle of the craziness and chaos, right smack into the gold, circumstance and mud of the world, and everything changed. When He came, it was God saying, “I love you, world. I love you. I know who you are and how you are, and I love you. It’s going to be okay. Because of this child, evil will never have the final word. Because of this child, chaos will come to an end. Because of this child, you will know peace, even in the midst of the chaos and craziness. Because of this child, you will have life, and have it in abundance, and have it for eternity. Because of this child, all is calm, all is bright.”

Because of this child, life can be different, and anything is possible.

Leo, a reporter for the Chicago Tribune, found that out one Christmas years ago. Leo was a self-professed atheist, and he was sitting at his desk on Christmas Eve, waiting for closing time, and as he sat there, he found himself thinking about a family about whom he had written while doing a series of articles on the neediest people of the city. The family was named Delgado, a family of three comprised of a grandmother named Perfecta and her two granddaughters, Jenny, age 13 and Lydia, age 11.

“He remembered how unprepared her was when he walked into their two room apartment on the west side of Chicago for the interview – bare halls and bare walls, no furniture, no rugs, nothing but a kitchen table and a handful of rice in the cupboards. He learned during the interview that Jenny and Lydia only had one short-sleeved dress apiece, plus a thin gray sweater that they shared. On cold days when the girls walked the half-mile to school, one of the girls would start with the sweater and then give it to the other at the halfway mark. It was all they had.

Perfecta wanted more for her granddaughters and would gladly have worked, but her severe arthritis made work too difficult and painful.”

Since it was a slow news day, Leo decided to leave the office and go and catch up with the Delgado’s. He pulled up in front of their apartment house, went up the steps and in the building, found their door and knocked, and young Jenny answered, remembered him, and invited him in. And when Leo went in, he almost fainted, because he couldn’t believe what he saw! Apparently his article had touched hearts throughout the city of Chicago, and the apartment was now full – to overflowing! Furniture, appliances, rugs, dozens of coats, and piles of clothing – and boxes of food everywhere – so much food that the cupboards couldn’t hold it all! Someone had even donated a fully-decorated Christmas tree and under it was a pile of brightly wrapped presents, and even a pile of cash!

Leo was blown away by it all – but he didn’t know the half of it yet. Perfecta and her granddaughters were going through it all, and preparing to give most of it away! Leo was stunned, and asked them why they were going to give it away? Perfecta said, “Because our neighbors are still in need. We can’t have plenty while they have nothing. This is what Jesus would want us to do.”

Taking a breather for a moment, Leo said to Perfecta, “what do you think of all this, about the generosity that has come your way?” And you know what Perfecta said to him? “This is all wonderful. We did nothing to deserve this, it’s all a gift from God. But it is not His greatest gift, Leo. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. Jesus.” (On-line, sermonillustrations.org)

In the midst of the chaos and craziness, in the midst of love and generosity, and even in the midst of skepticism and belief, Jesus comes. God’s greatest gift – and all is calm, all is bright. It is God saying to us – “It’s going to be okay. It’s going to be okay. I am here right in the midst of you. It’s going to be okay.”

If you hear nothing else tonight, hear that. Because of Jesus, it’s going to be okay. No matter how crazy or chaotic life gets, no matter how much it looks like evil is in control, no matter how skeptical people are, no matter what’s happening in the world at large, or the world swirling right around you – because of Jesus, it’s going to be okay – so tonight, all is calm and all is bright.

So I want close with one final story. A pastor was making visits in a nursing home just before Christmas. She stopped to see Hazel in her wheelchair sitting in the hallway, then spent a few moments with Verina and her daughter who was visiting her. And finally, she made her way to Ruth, a dementia patient. She knew it wouldn’t be an easy visit, but she sat down and started talking to Ruth. She asked her what her favorite Christmas carol was and amazingly, Ruth started to

sing in a little small voice – Away in a Manger. The pastor says that she didn't quite know all the words, but she knew the tune and muddled through it.

When she finished, she turned and looked at the pastor, and said, "You know, if I could have one more job, I would like to preach." The pastor was surprised and delighted, and said to Ruth, "Well, what would you preach?" Ruth paused for a moment and then she said, "God loves you . . . and that's about it." (Janet Hunt, "A Christmas Message," *Dancing with the Word*)

Well, I don't know about you, but I think that's the perfect sermon for Christmas Eve – "God loves you . . . and that's about it." God loves you and me so much that He sent His only begotten Son into the world - into the gold, circumstance and mud; into the world of saints and sinners, doubters and disciples, chaos and calm; and with that Son, said in the most perfect way, "It's going to be okay. All is calm, all is bright."

So, my friends, go forth into this calm, bright and perfect night knowing that "God loves you . . . and that's about it!"

Amen.