

December 19, 2010
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski
Simply Christmas
“Less Rush, More Breath”
Luke 2.8-14; John 14.27

Do you remember the carol “Away in the Manger?”...a beautiful carol. How does it go? “Away in the manger, no crib for a bed, the little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head.” There is one line in this carol that has always troubled me, “Little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.”

What” Really” No crying? Of course, he cried. He was a vulnerable, innocent baby born into the harshest of circumstances. Of course, he cried.

In fact, with a week like this past week I need this child to cry because the mystery we contemplate is that this child cries for us. This child cries with us. This child cries that we might know we will never be alone in our tears.

Did you know that it was St. Francis of Assisi who invented the Christmas pageant in 1223? Francis of Assisi was disturbed by the way the birth of Jesus was celebrated in the church with jewels and gold and silk in the courts of nobility. The worship was far removed from the realities of the average person.

For his midnight mass on Christmas Eve, 1223, St. Francis shocked everybody by staging the nativity complete with live, noisy, messy, unpredictable animals...real people who coughed and sneezed...poor people dressed in rags, not in gold and silk...and a real baby...a baby who cried. He wanted to remind people that God came in Jesus to share the nitty gritty of our lives, to share the some times harsh reality of our lives, to laugh with us, to cry with us.

Of course, the baby cried. He cried for us. He cries with us. The baby cried because we cry.

I received a beautiful Christmas card this week of a beautiful manger scene. It all looked so perfect. There was a peaceful glow with starlight filtering through a nice little window to a perfect family surrounding a beautiful baby, who, of course, wasn't crying but smiling, lying on the nicest and most comfortable looking pile of hay you could imagine.

It was picture perfect. Even the donkey and cow were smiling and enjoying the moment.

However, the reality of the first Christmas story was far from picture perfect.

For several months, Mary and Joseph had been dealing with the pressure of her being pregnant before they were married...not easy in their strict Jewish community...not to mention being in a small town where everybody knows everybody's business and loves to talk about it in whispers as they gather at the well. For months they would have been dealing with that stuff in a very unforgiving religious community.

Then, in Mary's ninth month they had to travel to Bethlehem for the census. The Roman Emperor was demanding taxation of every one to support his military throughout the Roman Empire. The Jewish people were taxed to pay for the soldiers who were occupying their land. Joseph and Mary and thousands of others lived oppressed lives in the grip of Rome and in the grip of fear where life was very uncertain. These were hard and desperate days...not an ideal climate to welcome a child into the world.

Mary and Joseph had to travel two days to Bethlehem on the back of a donkey for this census. I don't know about you guys. My wife is extremely gracious but my life would have been short lived if I said we had to take a two day trip on the back of a donkey in her 9th month of pregnancy.

They get to Bethlehem and because of the census all the inns were full. It makes me wonder whether there was conflict in Joseph's family because Bethlehem is where he is from and they seem not to be welcome with anyone from his family.

There was no room in the inn. The innkeeper says they can stay in the barn out back with all the animals. Historians suggest this barn was probably a cave dug out of a hill with a dirt floor. A damp, dark, cold stable full of cows and donkeys and other animals...not exactly the fresh clean manger scene we see on the Christmas cards. In fact, the manger is actually a feeding trough.

Mary goes into labor and the child enters the world into these conditions. If love and hope are born in this unlikely place through these unlikely people, is your life any more unlikely for love and hope to be born this year? And, of course, the child cried...probably screamed. He cried because we cry. He cries for us. He cries with us still.

As the babies cry pierced the night air on that holy night, angels appeared to shepherds at work in their fields. They were the ones invited to be the first to kneel before this mystery. Shepherds, considered unclean because of the nature of their job. They wouldn't have even been allowed access to the temple to worship. The angel says to them, "Don't be afraid (standard opening line for angels, it seems), I bring you good news of great joy for unto you this day is born in the city of David a Savior...you will find him wrapped in cloths lying in a manger..."

I am sure they weren't expecting news of great joy that cold night as they were trying to endure the night shift.

What do you expect this Christmas?

Christmas is a painful and stressful time for many. This season of joy is a thorn in the side for many who can scarcely imagine joy right now.

One of the reasons Christmas can be so painful is that our culture doesn't want the baby to cry...our culture wants the picture perfect Christmas card with the child lying comfortable in the neat straw smiling up at his adoring parents.

We are constantly surrounded by marketing images and advertisements that tell us this time of year is supposed to be a warm, joyous time when every one gets what they want and every one magically gets along..right?

There is something sunk deep into our cultural consciousness that Christmas is a happy time for happy people. If you don't have the Christmas Spirit, you're a grinch. You're not allowed to be grumpy or sad but the reality is this season often accentuates any pain or sadness we might be experiencing.

You know, I think we have it backwards. It is our sadness, our pain, our grief, our fear that we are invited to acknowledge and bring to the manger as our offering.

Christmas, the incredible story of the incarnation of God's love, is precisely for those who desperately need to hear some good news of great joy. Christmas is precisely for those who need to get close enough to the manger hear the cry of the child so they might know they are not alone in their own tears.

There has been unspeakable grief and tragedy and sadness this past week . I know for many of you it has been an extremely difficult year. Some times there are just no words to express the pain people experience in life. All we are left with at times are our tears. We need to hear the child cry so that we might know we are not alone in our own tears.

The irony of all ironies is that Christmas really is for those who will find it the hardest to enjoy. Christmas is exactly for those who hate it the most.

Christmas is for you, not to pretend everything's ok...pretend everything's happy, merry and bright – but to be reminded of a child who cried, who cried for you, who cries with you- To be reminded of a light that has entered the world that no amount of darkness can overcome-

To be reminded of a love that is stronger than the challenges you face – a love that is always with you and will never let you go- To call you to a greater purpose of incarnating that love in your own life.

In my previous church in Chicago, we would go every year and throw a Christmas party for children who lived in the housing projects. One year, a little boy about 5 years-old blurted out with tears streaming down his cheeks, “My mama said there is no Santa Claus. Santa never came to my house.”

I didn't know what to say. I thought my heart was going to break. I said I was sorry that Santa had missed his home...maybe there was a mix up somewhere. I said, “But we brought some extra toys with us and I'll bet some of them are yours.”

I gave this little boy some gifts, and I told him the story of a baby born in the poorest of places, a barn, and how the baby's crib was

the cow's feedbox and how that baby's birth shows us how much God loves us...how that baby's cry means that God always hears our cries...and how there is nowhere we can go – no place so far away, so poor, so remote, so dark, that God's love cannot find us. I gave this little boy a hug as he wiped his tears away and I realized then as I realize now that it was the Christ child who was holding us both.

The angels announced "I bring you news of great joy." They didn't say, "I bring you news of great happiness." That is not the gift that God has given us.

Joy is very different from happiness.

Teilhard de Chardin said, "Joy rises deep within from a sure sense of God's presence when you know you are held, no matter what, in the embrace of God's grace, and you can trust all will be well." Having a happy, merry Christmas might be dependant on whether all the externals around us are calm, peaceful and happy, and the chances of that are probably quite slim.

That doesn't mean you can't have a joyous Christmas, a holy Christmas, a blessed Christmas which might mean taking the time to take a deep breath and recognize God's presence within you..around you. A joyous Christmas, a blessed Christmas, a holy Christmas might come in spite of the tears that may fall down your cheek when you remember the child cried. There is One who shares your tears and promises your tears will not have the last word. There will be a day when every tear is wiped from the eye.

There's a wonderful story I like to share every year at this time. It's the story of a man whose wife died, leaving him with a young son.

Back home from the memorial service at the cemetery, they went to bed early because there was nothing else he could bear to do. As this grief-stricken father lay there in the darkness, heartbroken, he was startled by a question from his young son who was stretched out before him.

“Daddy, when is mommy coming back?” The father tried to respond out of his own agony, but the boy was still frightened, restless. Finally, the little boy said, “Daddy, if your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep.”

The father turned his face to the little boy and he calmed down and in a little while he drifted off to sleep.

The father lay there in the darkness and then he lifted up his own needy heart to God and prayed, “Oh God, the way is dark, I confess right now I can’t see the way through; but if your face is toward me, I know somehow we’ll make it. I don’t know how but I know we’ll make it.”

That’s the good news of great joy we prepare to receive once again this week in the birth of Jesus...God turned God’s face toward us and it is the face of love...a love that cries for us...a love that cries with us... a love that holds us . . . a love that will never let us go.

Maybe you’re in that dark place where it is hard to be merry or happy. Take a deep breath – it’s okay to be where you are. Give yourself a break. Let go of all those expectations. Just breathe ...breathe in the realization that God has turned God’s face toward you and it is the face of love...simply find time to breathe in the presence of that love.

You may not have a merry Christmas, but you can have a holy one. Maybe you are one of the ones blessed to not be in a dark place right now. You are still in the story. You are one of the angels. It is

your job to proclaim good news of great joy...by turning your face
and your heart to some one in need of love . . . turning your face
and heart to a world in need of love!