

“Two Babies in a Manger”

John 1:6-8, 19-28

preached on December 13, 2009

In a periodical called “Homiletics,” I found this story:

Back in 1994, two Americans were invited by the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics in their prisons, at their businesses, in fire and police departments and even at a large orphanage. And they were also told that they could teach from the perspective of their faith, which was quite surprising, even revolutionary. So they went as witnesses to the light. Like John the Baptist, they went “*to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.*” These two Americans believed that Jesus, the true light that enlightens everyone, was coming into the world in a new and powerful way. And that was the teaching and testimony that they were prepared to give.

The experience of these two in a Russian orphanage proved to be particularly illuminating. One of them was a man who calls himself “Will Fish.” Maybe that’s his real name but more likely it is a pseudonym for an anonymous Christian who is willing to “fish for people.” But according to Will Fish, there were about 100 boys and girls in this one orphanage. These were children who had been abandoned, abused and left in the care of a government-run program. When the holiday season was approaching, these children got to hear the traditional story of Christmas for the very first time. Will Fish tells about his experience this way:

AWe told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins that I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city. Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger to simulate the straw. We found a worn-out nightgown from an American who was just throwing it away as she left Russia. We cut it into small flannel squares that could be used as the baby’s blanket. And finally, a doll-like baby was cut from some tan felt that we had brought from the States.

AThe orphans were busy assembling their mangers as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy’s manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed

manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had heard the Christmas story only once, he related the happenings accurately. It was accurate until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad lib.

“He made up his own ending to the story as he said, ‘And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don’t have any 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 - for always.’

“As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him for always.”

We call Jesus by the name Emmanuel, which means “God is with us.” In this Advent season, we discover, like the orphan Misha, that the God who came in Jesus Christ will never abandon or abuse us, but will stay with us for always. Jesus promises to be with us when the biopsy comes back positive, instead of negative; when the final exam is marked with an “F,” rather than an “A”; when the spouse of 15 years stomps out the door, and doesn’t return; when the dream of success in business is once again downsized and diminished; when the late-night long-distance call communicates the end of a life and not the beginning of a new one; Jesus stays with us when the longing for family harmony is shattered by a shouting match; and when the desire for companionship is drained by another lonely holiday season.

In Jesus Christ, God is with us. And our Lord does more than just show up. In an article entitled “Loneliness and the season of Immanuel,” A. Stephen Pieters wrote, *“I remember that when they told me I had AIDS, two kinds of cancer and eight months to live, I felt a cosmic sense of loneliness. I had never felt so abandoned. Yes, there were people there with me, holding me, comforting me. But I realized in the depths of my heart that no one else could go through this for me. The most loving, caring person in the world could not have my bone marrow biopsies, or my spinal taps, or my chemotherapy. The most compassionate person in my life could not do the dying for me. [Then] Just as I was feeling most sorry for myself, someone reminded me that the most compassionate, loving person in my life already did the dying for me. Jesus faced death at an early age, abandoned by many of his friends and family, and he died for all of us. And that*

wasn't the end of the story, of course. God raised Jesus from the dead, and Jesus is alive and with us today. Immanuel: 'God with Us.' Still.”

In all these depressing, discouraging, and disillusioning situations, our Lord is present. Here is Emmanuel, God with us. We're never completely without companionship or support, as long as there are two babies in the manger. So, why don't we do a very good job of keeping Jesus warm? What is it that threatens to separate us from the Christ child these days?

Part of the problem is a sort of selective blindness in that we simply don't see the manger. In our frantic search for comfort and joy, we look for lasting pleasure in all the wrong places. We go to clubs and classes, parties and programs, Internet chatrooms and professional conferences. There is certainly some good to be found in these gatherings, but they also distract us from the one place we can find unconditional acceptance and unending peace. In his book, The Principle of the Path, Andy Stanley notes that we move toward the things that grab our attention. And when we are distracted by so many things, we move toward them and, sadly, away from the manger. Yet it is only in a close relationship with Jesus Christ that we discover how truly valuable we are as children of God. We are even told by both Jesus and Paul that we will not be left as orphans. We have been adopted as children so we might have a place to go for always.

We also have a problem with our incessant busyness. We just don't have time for the manger. Particularly in the season of Advent, our days are driven by endless office parties, school concerts, church pageants and shopping excursions, not to mention the cultural requirements of holiday decorating and Christmas-card-writing, perhaps some extra cooking and baking. Kind of ironic, isn't it, that the escalating demands of Advent prevent us from taking time to focus on the reason for the season? Perhaps each of us should carve out an evening this week just to slow down and rest. Pretend that the Christ child has been born this day in your house, requiring you to simply stay home and keep Him warm.

In addition, we face the challenge of doubt, that is, sometimes we don't believe in the manger. The world is such a violent place, and so often victory seems to go to the powers with the largest arsenals and the most ruthless tactics. What chance does a baby in a manger have against suicide bombers, serial killers, machine-gun-toting terrorists and brutal, corrupt governments? It's not a fair fight. And yet, no single life has changed the world more than the life of that baby born in Bethlehem; a life that challenges people to look beyond this world to the kingdom of God.

There is always room for another baby in the manger. If we make the trip to Bethlehem, we find the One who will stay with us on our journey, every step of the way, and will guide us toward an everlasting kingdom, a kingdom filled with love, joy, peace, and justice. If we just give this baby

comfort and support, we will find true support, we will find the comfort and joy that we desire, that we seek for ourselves.

But there is more to Advent than the pursuit of personal joy and peace. In this time of preparation for Christmas, we are also challenged. We are challenged to testify to the power of Christ in our own lives, and to tell the world about what Emmanuel is up to. That’s what Will Fish and his colleague did when they traveled to Russia. That’s what little Misha did when he put two babies in the manger. And it’s what John the Baptist did when he came as a witness to testify to the light of Christ, so that all might believe in Him and through Him.

Did you ever notice that in the Gospel of John, John is never identified as “the Baptist?” He constantly and consistently shifts the focus away from baptism and toward Jesus. John has one and only one function in this gospel, and that is to witness to Jesus. There’s a lesson in this for us. Our challenge as Christians is never to simply stay close to Jesus and to enjoy his forgiveness, acceptance, and peace. We also need to explain to the world why we are choosing to be one of two babies in the manger.

The ushers have something to give you right now. Physically it has come out of my computer, but spiritually, it comes from the very hand and the very heart of God. It is an invitation. Jesus invites you to join Him in the manger. Enjoy Him always, and share Him in all ways. You could share Him by adopting a low-income family this Christmas, and directing a significant percentage of your gift giving toward them. Or by promising to pray in a consistent, disciplined way for a troubled region of the world, or a troubled child in the area. You could agree to mentor a young person preparing for membership in the church, or be a tutor to help them prepare for college or the world. You might even brainstorm with others about creative and compassionate ways to go beyond the walls of this church, to reach out to the neighborhood. Or teach a class of children, opening their minds and hearts to the stories of the Bible. Perhaps you’ll ponder how best to live out your Christian faith in the workplace. Or maybe you could simply include a commitment to daily prayer and Bible study in your New Year’s resolutions. Maybe this is the time to promise to yourself and to your Lord that you will talk with friends about what Jesus means to you, and why you feel a need to be close to Him, to keep Him warm, that He might warm your heart and soul.

What does the appearance of Christ mean to you and the world? With this simple birth in a dark, out of the way stable Jesus promises to be with us even when the biopsy comes back positive or the exam is marked with an “F”; when the spouse stomps out and doesn’t return or the dream of success is downsized and diminished once again; when the late-night call speaks of death, and when the longing for family harmony is shattered by a shouting match. Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us, even when the desire for companionship is drained by another lonely holiday season.

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This is someone who will never abandon nor abuse you. He is someone who will stay with us, who will stay with you for always.

If we go into the manger with Him, if we will stay close enough to help keep Him warm, He will warm our hearts and souls. He will stay with us for always. The invitation has been extended. How will you R.S.V.P.? How will you respond?