

Love Came Down at Christmas

A sermon based on Psalm 80:1-7, Micah 5:2-5, and Luke 1:39-55

Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
December 24, 2000

In Christmas seasons past I have often bemoaned the grinchers in the public media who run anti-Christian pieces just prior to Christmas, in an effort, I suppose, to keep us humble. And in reaction I have tried to celebrate Christmas passionately and with abandon and encouraged you to do the same! It is, after all, one of our high holy days, and there are plenty of opportunities during the rest of the year for critical analysis and introspection. At Christmastime, I say: Let's celebrate!

I almost regret this impulse now, for this week I read of a Christmas celebration "gone to seed". An international financial firm, wanting to thank its employees for working hard, flew them to London, England for an extravagant staff Christmas celebration. It's nice to have a generous employer, I suppose, but this businessman spent two and a half million dollars on a Christmas party that did not use the traditional Christmas themes. In fact, the theme of the party was the Seven Deadly Sins! (Ottawa Citizen, Business section, December 22, 2000)

Though King Herod was probably familiar with most of the seven "deadlies," it is not a theme I usually associate with Christmas. Nevertheless, among other intemperate features, the London Christmas party featured a Lust Room with an eight-metre-wide bed covered in purple satin and a Sloth Room, where partygoers could drink champagne, get a massage, or have a tarot card reading! Gluttony was celebrated at the ten bars, each lined with a trough packed with truffles and candies, where entertainers acting as "fatties" lay on the floor having food shoved into their mouths! One of the partygoers said, "It was just unbelievable. You did feel a little uneasy just because of the sheer decadence of the event."

Meanwhile, the Avarice Room was a financial company, after all was bedecked with gold drapes, where entertainers circulated with guests, waving bundles of cash and shouting: "Money, ain't it gorgeous?" I just hope they didn't sing Christmas carols and further desecrate a holiday that is the very antithesis of such excess and greed.

An Alternative Pattern

Contrast the London Sloth and Avarice Suites with the drama of the first Christmas, when a poor and tired couple -- the woman very pregnant -- arrived in town on a lowly donkey. They had not had a good year. And their long-term prospects didn't appear promising. No one waved bundles of cash in their faces; in fact, they couldn't even get a room in the local inn! There was no bed, large or small. No bassinet for the baby that would be born that night. No entertainers to sing the baby a lullaby.

Contrast our modern admiration of the titans of greed and our support of political figures who worship the ground they walk upon, with Mary's song of praise in our Gospel reading. Mary's song is set in quite a different key. It's a major key if you can join in with her praise of God, but it may sound like a minor key if you don't like some of its political and economic implications.

Mary felt extraordinarily blessed, not because she had a good year or because she excelled in sloth, gluttony and avarice, but because of her lowly estate. "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour," says Mary, because God "has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant." (Luke 1:46-47)

Mary's song, the Magnificat, has obvious similarities to the Old Testament Song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10), but scholars have noted that this song is a wonderful patchwork of Hebrew textual allusions and images. (Exodus 15:1-18; Exodus 15:21; 1 Chronicles 16:7-36; Judges 5:1-31; Psalms 33; 47; 136) In short, Mary's song is a summary of Israel's political expectations, a subversive song in which God empowers the powerless! Mary sings of God's tendency to bring "down the powerful from their thrones" and to "lift up the lowly!" (Luke 1:52) If God had His way and ultimately His will will be done, God will "fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty!" (1:53) And Mary sings this song, not because she was kidnapped by some cult the night before, but because she believes in God's providence; because she knows God to be a God of mercy" (1:54); and because it fits the pattern of how God works! It is, Mary says, in accordance with "...the promise (God) made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." (1:55)

Mary offers us an insight into the pattern of salvation history. Mary knew the Scriptures. She was familiar with God's characteristic way of intervening in human affairs, for, from the exodus on, God's pattern of redemption has been to use what is of limited worth to convey his un-limited love. God, after all, didn't send Moses on his rescue mission to Egypt because of Moses' great gifts of leadership and oratory. God didn't choose Israel because of her strength, culture and knowledge.

Mary knew the pattern by which God cuts the fabric of redemption. Her insight into that pattern is reflected in Dorothy Sayers' play, "The Man Born to Be King," in which the character of Mary says: "...when the angel's message came to me...I suddenly saw that wealth and cleverness (are) nothing to God. No one is too un-important to be (God's) friend... I am humbly born, yet the power of God came upon me; I am very foolish and unlearned yet the Word of God was spoken to me...."

Salvation comes, according to this pattern, not to those whose wealth and power allows them to wallow in decadence, but to those who feel unworthy of any blessing or honour. The shepherds would never have considered themselves worthy of hearing good news about royalty, yet it was they who heard a choir of angels singing, "Glory to God in the Highest!" And announcing the birth of the Messiah, the King of kings!

God's redemption is cut from quite a different cloth than our culture offers us, though from time to time we catch a glimpse of it. In 1979 a Roman Catholic nun was given the Nobel Peace Prize! Though most of her adult life was spent ministering to the poor and diseased of Calcutta, she accepted the prize with the comment, "I am unworthy."

I have also read that when the funeral procession of the emperor Charlemagne who, by the way was crowned emperor on Christmas Day, when his funeral procession arrived at the cathedral, the attendants were shocked to find the gate to it barred by the bishop.

"Who comes?" shouted the bishop.

"Charlemagne, Lord and King of the Holy Roman Empire!" answered the attendants.

Replied the bishop, "Him I know not! Who comes?"

The attendants answered, "Charles the Great, a good and honest man of the earth!"

Again the bishop answered, "Him I know not. Who comes?"

The attendants answered, "Charles, a lowly sinner, who begs the gift of Christ."

"Him I know," the bishop replied. "Enter!" (John and Barbara Brokhoff, There's Always Hope)

I don't know if it's a true story, but the pattern it betrays is an eternal and redemptive pattern, and a pattern retained in Christian memory. It's reflected, for example, in Paul's letter to the Corinthians, when he reminds them, "For consider ...not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world..." (1 Corinthians 1:26-28, RSV)

It's a pattern that stretches from the Old Testament to the New! Isaiah, a great prophet, confessed, "I am a man of unclean lips." The Apostle Paul confessed that he was "chief of sinners." In another letter to the Corinthians Paul points out the pattern again, a little more gently this time, pointing out that God has no hesitation in using vulnerable earthen vessels like ourselves, for, says Paul, "...we have this treasure in earthen vessels, to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us." (2 Corinthians 4:7, RSV)

Of course, it's a pattern revealed in the life of our Lord himself, for he was glorified, the New Testament tells us, not because he was in the form of God or equal with God, but because he emptied himself, because he took on himself the form of a servant, because "...he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. For this reason (TEV) God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name...." (Philippians 2:6-9, RSV)

Love Came Down at Christmas

God too followed the pattern on the first Christmas, as a man named Henry discovered one Christmas Eve. Henry administered a home for emotionally disturbed children, and one Christmas Eve one of the staff members came to say that one of the children, Tommy, had crawled under his bed and refused to come out. Henry went to Tommy's bed, and addressed the bed, talking about the brightly lighted tree downstairs, the packages underneath it, and the many good things that were waiting for Tommy out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the bed spread. Tommy was eight, but he looked like a five year old. Henry could easily have pulled him out, but it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed, it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative. So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after the service. He told of the stocking with Tommy's name on it.

Silence. There was no indication Tommy heard, or even cared about Christmas.

At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in under the bed, right alongside Tommy. Henry lay there with his

cheek pressed against the floor for a long time, telling Tommy about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Tommy. After a bit, a small child's chilled hand slipped into his. Henry said, "You know, Tommy, it's kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up." Which they did. (Christmas Stories For the Heart, compiled by Alice Gray, Multnomah Publishers, 1998)

Such is the simple but profound mystery of Christmas. Though God is far above us, the Creator of the cosmos, God loves us, and God's love came down at Christmas to make sure we understand how deeply God loves us. Often we have not listened to God, but when we haven't God has drawn even closer. God spoke to us through lawgivers and prophets and other holy individuals, but it was not until that first Christmas, until God stooped to earth itself, until he took our very place and came to dwell with us that we, like Tommy, dared to stretch out our hands to Him in trust and love.

In this Christmas Season, when the pattern all around us is not so much a pattern of generous love as an orgy of self-indulgence, it is well to remind ourselves that we, as Christians, are cut from a different pattern. Christmas is not the time to revel in human nature, but rather to celebrate the power of God's Spirit to transform human nature to turn our greed into generosity; to turn avarice into sacrifice; envy into good will and graciousness; to transform pride into humility; lust into disciplined wholesomeness; anger into love; gluttony into moderation; and sloth into purposeful action.

May our lives give vivid testimony to the transforming power of God's magnificent love.

Prayer

Eternal God, we join Elizabeth and Mary in awaiting the fulfillment of Your will for humankind. You have called us to be a sign of hope in the world, and we pray for the strength to refuse greed, envy, and other things deadly to our relationships with You and with each other.

We thank You, gracious God, that no one is beyond Your love. No one is beyond Your transforming power. Continue to inspire us to reach out to the forsaken; to bandage the wounded; to challenge injustice; to plant seeds of faith; and to build bridges of understanding. Stretch our vision to include the improbable and strengthen our wills to take the steps necessary. Assure us again that You can do exceedingly more than we can ever ask or imagine. AMEN

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.