

# **“I WANTED YOU TO MEET ME”**

**Luke 2:1-20; Titus 2:11-14**

**Market Square Presbyterian Church in the City of  
Harrisburg, Pennsylvania**

**The Reverend Thomas A. Sweet**

**December 24, 2017 - Christmas Eve**

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Gerald Coffee was a captain in the United States Navy whose plane was shot down over North Vietnam during our country's war with that nation. He spent years as a prisoner of war, confined in a small, narrow cell. Writing a few years ago in his memoir entitled, Beyond Survival, Coffee recalls his third Christmas in captivity, this particular Christmas in prison distinguished from the others by the fact the Vietnamese gave candy bars to the prisoners. The candy was wrapped in foil that was red on the outside and silver on the inside. Captain Coffee flattened one wrapper and folded it into an origami swan. Then he flattened a second and folded it into crisp little pleats, tied the pleats in the center with a thread, and fanned out the edges to make a rosette.

Outside his cell, he could hear the guards with their families. They were celebrating Christmas together. He heard some boys he guessed to be about three or four, the sons of the guard-in-charge, playing on the floor with toy cars and trucks. It reminded Coffee of his own sons back home.

There was one more wrapper. He began folding it, not sure what he would make with it. It ended up being a star. How appropriate, he thought to himself, as he named it the Star of Bethlehem! Removing three straws from the broom in his cell, he attached the wrapper ornaments to them. Then he jammed the straws into a crack in the wall above his bed and sat watching them twist and turn in the light from the yellow bulb that relentlessly illuminated his cell.

He found himself thinking about the simplicity of Christ's birth and of what it had meant in his own life. It was his faith, he realized, that was sustaining him through his imprisonment. He wrote:

*"There in the prison there was nothing to distract me from the awesomeness of Christmas- no commercialism, no presents, very little food. I was beginning to appreciate my own spirituality, because I had been stripped of everything by which I previously had measured my identity: rank, uniform, money, family. Yet I continued to find strength within myself. I realized that although I was hurting and lonely and scared, this might be the most significant Christmas of my life."*

At some point along Gerald Coffee's life's journey, he had met God in Jesus Christ and, when everything else had been taken from him, that relationship was enough to uphold him and see him through his trouble. *"It was pretty amazing,"* he said, *"to think of God actually getting in touch with a human being!"*

It is...pretty amazing.

Then there is this story from the South Dakota prairie. In his book, Choteau Creek: A Sioux Remembrance, Joseph Iron Eye Dudley writes of the rich learnings from his childhood when he lived with his grandparents. Those years were poor in things but rich in soul.

*"On Christmas morning, I carefully unwrapped my five presents from Grandma and Grandpa. We always unwrapped presents with care so Grandma could save as much paper as possible for next year. The five presents I received were a handkerchief, a pair of socks, a ballpoint pen and a tablet to go with it, and a box of chocolate-covered cherries. I could expect to get those items every Christmas from then on, for the next eight years until I was sixteen years old. I not only expected them; I looked forward to them. And the year I stopped getting them, I missed them, and did so for several years afterward."*

*"For Grandma and Grandpa, Christmas morning came and went, as in so many other years,*

*without any presents for them to open.  
I suppose this had happened for the last fifteen years,  
ever since the Great Depression.  
The only presents they received from time to time  
were the ones we made at school in art of woodworking classes;  
that was all."*

*"Early on Christmas morning Grandpa brought  
a warm, fresh cup of coffee to their bed  
and offered Grandma a 'sip' from his cup.  
He would say, 'Merry Christmas, my dear,'  
and kiss her on her cheek.  
That was his Christmas present to her.  
Her Christmas present to him  
was an extra-good Christmas dinner:  
roasted chicken with all the trimmings,  
including cranberries and pumpkin pie.  
Of course, Grandpa enjoyed and appreciated  
every meal she prepared but,  
because Christmas dinner was extra special,  
both in content and in meaning,  
he always showed extra appreciation that day."*

*"As I grew older,' Iron Eye remembered,  
'it became apparent that their Christmas gifts to each other  
were themselves. That enabled me to discover a much  
deeper meaning of Christmas - that the gift of Christmas  
comes in the form of a person. And every year I received  
from them not only a handkerchief, a pair of socks,  
a ballpoint pen and a tablet to go with it,  
and a box of chocolate-covered cherries,  
but also the gift of Grandpa and Grandma.'"*

So, two stories and two insights. The first is from a soldier whose faith sustained him in the midst of a long and arduous confinement - *"How incredible that God gets in touch with human beings,"* and the second is from the childhood memories of a Sioux Indian - *"The gift of Christmas comes in the form of a person."*

I think I cannot say the meaning of Christmas any clearer than that. The God and Creator of the universe whose handiwork we see whenever we look up into a starry night or down onto the tender flesh of a newborn infant and in myriads and myriads of other ways; this God has chosen to show God's nature not in power or might but by love...by loving the creation, by loving us, by humbling himself, by wanting what is best for us and all people.

The word Paul uses in his letter to Titus to describe God's disposition toward us is, in the Greek language in which Paul wrote, "*philanthropia*." It is, as you probably suspect, the word from which our word 'philanthropy' comes. God pours out God's largesse, God's treasure, God's goodwill, God's great hope for us, and God's love in the Child named Jesus whose birth we celebrate at Christmas.

Paul writes, "*When the philanthropia of God appeared, he saved us, not because of any works of righteousness we had done, but according to his mercy.*" God absolutely wants each of us to live our lives at their fullest, deepest, and best which is why God "got in touch with human beings" and why God did that by becoming a person. Jesus came into the world not only to reveal to us who God is but to show us who we are and how to live truly and fully human lives, lives that are marked by justice and mercy, by hospitality and generosity, by humility and love.

Paul says to Titus that "*...when the grace of God appeared, bringing salvation to all, we also were trained in the ways of salvation...*" God wants so much for us not to live our lives in ways that are shallow, superficial, or insipid but inspired, purposeful, and glorious that God came to us as a person, the person of Jesus, that we may see God's way and follow, so that we could be trained in the ways of salvation, in deep and holy living.

Following Jesus, we become neighbors not only to those with whom neighborliness is convenient or convivial. Our Lord says, "*Of what credit to you is that? Even the sinners do that much.*" We become neighbors to those who need neighbors,<sup>1</sup> like our Palestinian sisters and brothers who routinely are tyrannized by an obstinate and oppressive Israeli government. Like our homeless sisters and brothers who try to subsist on the streets of our city. Like those who come to this congregation looking for acceptance they have not found anywhere else in their lives.

Following Jesus, we do not look after our own interests first of all but after the interests of others. Do we support legislation in our state house and the White House and Congress that may not help us directly but does address the needs of those who live on the margins or at the edges

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<sup>1</sup> Luke 10:36-37

of life or do we look only after our own concerns? Do we expect others to serve and meet our needs or are our lives committed to serving others in theirs?<sup>2</sup>

Following Jesus, when others stand against us as enemies we do not repay evil with evil<sup>3</sup> but overcome evil with good.<sup>4</sup> We bless those who persecute us, bless and do not curse.<sup>5</sup> So far as it depends on us, we live peaceably with all.<sup>6</sup> *“Pray for your enemies,”*<sup>7</sup> Jesus says, lifting them into God's care and light, refusing ourselves to be an enemy to those who name us as such.

Naive? Pollyanna-ish? Not at all. It is the way of God who comes to us in Jesus *“for with God, all things are possible.”*<sup>8</sup>

What we learn from Jesus is that we move much closer to the new heaven and new earth,<sup>9</sup> the peaceable kingdom,<sup>10</sup> and the Beloved Community<sup>11</sup> when our hearts and minds grow larger and more inclusive. Only that which builds community among all God's people can finally be good for any individual.

One last story.

The late Joseph Bayly, a well known Christian commentator and writer in the last half of the last century whose book Psalms of My Life<sup>12</sup> is one of my very favorites, told of an incident that happened at a public event where he had been the keynote speaker. An older man, someone who greatly appreciated Bayly's writing and for whom Bayly was something of a hero, approached Bayly after his talk and, extending a hand of greeting, said to Bayly, *“I told the missus I had to come tonight because I already knew you, but I wanted you to meet me.”*<sup>13</sup>

It is what God says to each of us at Christmas as we greet and welcome Jesus Christ into our lives. *“I had to come because I already knew you, but I wanted you to meet me.”*

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 10:45

<sup>3</sup> Romans 12:17

<sup>4</sup> Romans 12:21

<sup>5</sup> Romans 12:14

<sup>6</sup> Romans 12:18

<sup>7</sup> Matthew 5:44

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 19:26

<sup>9</sup> Revelation 21:1

<sup>10</sup> Isaiah 65:17-25

<sup>11</sup> A term and concept often attributed to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and referring to a society

based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow and sister human beings.

<sup>12</sup> Bayly, Joseph, Psalms of My Life. Colorado Springs: Cook Communications Company, 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Bayly, Joseph, A Voice in the Wilderness. (Republished in 2000 by David C. Cook Company, p. 265.

Merry, blessed Christmas! Amen.