

From Loneliness to Love
God's Promise of Community
Isaiah 35; Luke 2: 1-20
3rd Sunday of Advent 2009

As most of you know, Christmas is not my favorite holiday. Yes, I know that I am a Scrooge and I really can't hide behind the tired and worn out mantra that we have taken "Christ out of Christmas." In fact, I would argue that Christians have never taken Christ out of Christmas. If anything I think we do a remarkable job of staying true to our heritage and faith. So why don't I like the holiday? Well, it's not that I don't like it so much as I just don't enjoy it like I did when I was a child.

Christmas for me was all about – presents, OK, I'm being honest here! As a child I live for Christmas morning. I lived for the enjoyment of three separated occasions for present opening and two Christmas dinners.

Our day started like this: My sister and I would awaken about, well we actually never went to sleep; we would creep into the living room of our house sometime around "dark thirty." Where we would examine our haul – frankly it was obscene but I never complained. Then we would sneak back into bed and pretend that we were asleep so that we could be awakened by our parents to go into the living room to once again dive into the bounty.

Sometime in the mid-morning, we would dress and drive about 2 miles to my grandmother King's house – my mother's mother. There we would meet up with my other set of cousins; we would exchange gifts supervised by the biggest kid of all, my granddaddy King. The children would go out to play with their new toys while the women would retreat to the kitchen to finish the lunch preparations that my Grandmother had begun early that morning.

We would feast like the King of England; well it was actually the Queen of England. Then we would stash our loot into the trunk of our Chevrolet and haul it back to our house. There it would be unloaded and the next batch of presents placed in the trunk for the 48 mile journey to Brunswick, North Carolina, my father's birth home, where we would team up with yet several other sets of cousins, 3 aunts, a couple of uncles, depending on which one my Aunt Margaret was married to at the time, and my Grandmother Powell the matriarch of the family.

The scene from earlier in the day would be repeated. After Christmas dinner, the children would all go outside and play, usually football in my Grandmother's side yard. The adults would set up a bridge table, bring out the cards and begin that ubiquitous game that was as much a part of my growing up as was Westminster Presbyterian Church.

I think I even remember my dad once saying that Bridge was invented by Presbyterians just to confirm the Baptist belief that we were all damned.

I can still hear the talk around the dinner tables; I can still see my granddaddy King, more excited for us to open our presents than we were – I can hear him joking and kidding and well simply being the biggest kid on Christmas morning.

I can hear my Aunt Dot, sitting at the bridge table, Winston cigarette in one hand, Kem playing cards in the other, her Pepsi Cola resting near by, bidding her hand with an accountant's precision.

I can see the fire roaring in its place in Grandmother Powell's living room – the tree towering up to touch that ceiling that seemed to itself be touching heaven.

As a child, I thought that's the way it would always be; that it would never change; that we would simply grow up and trade places. Now I know that it was the innocent naiveté of a child.

My grandparents are all gone – I sure that Christmas changed when Granddaddy King got into heaven. He has made it much more fun. My dad died 40 years ago. Aunt Dot died from cancer – a Winton too many, I guess. Just last month my uncle Joe, Aunt Dot's husband and my dad's younger brother was moved into an Alzheimer's ward. Brunswick, the town that has had Powell's in it before it was a town, now has none. They are all gone – either dead or moved on to other places.

We are creating other memories – my daughter Lizzie is relentless in keeping tradition alive. Her idea of decorating makes Clark Griswold's look like an amateur. So all is not lost, certainly there are good memories of recent Christmas and there will be more.

But, when I sit back and remember a bit of loneliness creeps in – I can barely think about Uncle Joe, once so full of what the French call

jue de vie – or zest for life. Now, well ... we are all familiar with the ravaging results of that pernicious disease. I don't know what to think – the loneliness that nostalgia sometimes conjures up – frankly it's not what this season is supposed to be about.

Or is it? “And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby keeping watch over their flocks at night.”

In ancient Palestine, shepherds had the social status of an Armadillo. They were lowly regarded and even less trusted. They were loners. Spending their time watching after what has to be the dumbest animal on the face of the planet. An amoeba has more sense of self direction than a sheep.

The work of a shepherd was often assigned to the youngest son in the family. The story of King David bears witness to this. A shepherd's work was constant, tedious, and demanding. Sheep are “high maintenance,” requiring constant care and attention. A shepherd worked under different conditions in Jesus' time than they do today. First, the sheep were not fenced in and were totally dependent on a shepherd for protection, grazing, watering, and shelter. The shepherd could not leave the flock, so it left little time for socializing or participating in the religious life of the community.

Sheep are pathetic – they are helpless, defenseless, needy, and unable to provide for themselves. They literally have to be led to water because their sense of smell is so underdeveloped – I guess in fairness that's a good thing, if you've ever smelled a flock of sheep.

Most animals have a rather effective means of defense – sharp claws; teeth; speed or stealth; keenness of sight, smell or hearing; great strength or ferocity. But sheep are awkward, weak and dumber than a prune pizza. They have spindly legs and tiny hoofs, are pitifully slow and can't even growl. Totally defenseless! Their only hope of survival was the shepherd.¹

As I said earlier, shepherds were lowly regarded. They were considered thieves and notorious liars; you couldn't believe anything that they told you. They would be the last group in society to be entrusted with anything of value.

¹ Swindoll, Living Beyond the Daily Grind: Book 1, p. 69ff

And yet, right here in the middle of this reading – Angels appeared to the shepherds – shepherds and sheep – dumb and dumber! Then the angels said to them, “Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people ...” As soon as the angels left the shepherds left and went to Bethlehem to find this baby. And “when they had seen (Jesus), they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.”

You know, I bet they were amazed. Here coming with the news of the messiah, were the lowest and loneliest liars in the area. God had entrusted them with the first proclamation of this news – God does have a wonderful sense of irony.

In 1969 Neil Armstrong was the first man to set foot on the moon. President Richard Nixon then said that this was “the greatest event in human history.” James Irwin, another astronaut, disagreed. “The most significant achievement of our age,” he rightly said, “is not that man stood on the moon, but rather God, in Christ, stood on the earth.”

The most important news in the history of the universe came to the loneliest people on the universe. God in his perfect love, reached out to those on the very fringes of society and entrusted the most precious news imaginable to the most unimaginable people, including them as God includes all in his perfect plan of redemption. Wow, indeed like the angels said, “I bring you good news of great joy for all people!”

This good news is our hope. It is my hope – while my memories of Christmas past can't be relived this news brings hope this year and next; the good news of this gospel flooding into the present, washing us with his presence and replacing loneliness with love. Today in the town of David, a Savior, now like the shepherds go and find him and tell the Good News. Amen.