

“The Gift”
Brentwood First Presbyterian Church
12/24/06
Luke 2:1-20
The Reverend Michael J Magee, MD

Scene 1

(God invites the shepherds, and other lowly people, to the party)

My sons Shane and Paul will tell you I was once a Boy Scout. I can tell you from personal experience that the smell of a campfire is delightful. But have you ever smelled someone who has just come back from a camping trip, who has been near a campfire? In Jesus’ day shepherds warmed themselves near a campfire 24/7. So you know how they smell. And have you ever smelled sheep? For such white fluffy creatures which make such pleasing sounds, they smell almost as badly as skunks. Think of a whole flock of skunks! Amazingly, the shepherds sleep in the middle of them to get warm. Those shepherds smell as bad as any human being you have ever smelled. You know when a shepherd is near. Your nose literally burns.

Shepherds in Jesus’ day are society’s rejects, and they know it. Being a shepherd is the kind of job you have when you can get no other. So you do not want a shepherd for a son-in-law, or even to sit next to you in church. You certainly would not invite a shepherd to your birthday party. The shepherds know they are on no one’s guest list.

Brentwood First Presbyterian met Presbyterian missionary Roger Marriott, who gave the sermon at my ordination service. Guatemala, the country he serves, was in the news last year because of mudslides. It was also the subject of a TV series, “Survivor: Guatemala.” It has even been in two movies this year,

“Fountain” and “Apocalypto.” I am not recommending these movies, but they were about the culture of Guatemala. You can see pictures of Guatemalan Indians on the bulletin boards in the back and downstairs. In the imagination of our culture, these descendents of the Maya are the epitome of primitive culture. And in an unarticulated way, we here in Brentwood do not think of Mayan aboriginals in Guatemala as being quite like us. After all, they are a foot shorter, have different color skin, and don’t speak English. They don’t look like US. They are THEM. They are not US.

But the SHEPHERDS are on Jesus’ birthday guest list. It is to these smelly SHEPHERDS that God’s messengers bring the invitation to a birthday party. The SHEPHERDS, who were considered by their society as THEM, now become US.

Scene 2

(God gives courage to those God touches)

Fear sometimes stops us. It could have stopped the shepherds 2000 years ago, and it sometimes stops us now.

One cold night, shepherds gather around a campfire, hugging animals to get warm. Imagine their fear when messengers from God arrive to invite THEM, the rejects of society, to a BIRTHDAY party! God give them courage! But fear does not stop people touched by God. The shepherds overcome their fear of rejection and they go.

God invites us Presbyterians on a short term mission trip to Guatemala. To be messengers of God’s grace. To see Jesus in and be Jesus to the poor and oppressed aboriginals in the Mayan Peten. But we are afraid of diseases,

kidnappers, bugs, and mud. We suffer from or worry about conflict at home and abroad, and even conflict from within ourselves. We fear our employers will fire us, and we fear poor lodging and sleepless nights. We worry about who is going to take care of our children. We wonder if the money is better spent just sending a check instead of paying for our plane ticket. God give us courage!

But it is not about the money. It is about relationships. So with God's help, you overcome your fear. You take vaccinations, and you wear insect spray and boots. Armed with faith, you go. Fear does not stop the people God has touched. God has touched you. So you go.

Scene 3

(Jesus is God's love made palpable)

The idea of God putting on human flesh is a true mystery. What does this mean? Did Jesus come once and for all time 2000 years ago? Or will Jesus come just once more, as a powerful and august emperor, like Augustus Caesar or King Herod? Or does God's gift of love come to you a little every day? In other words, does Jesus come a little every day?

It was the custom in Judea to wrap the new born tightly in bands of cloth, what the King James version translates as "swaddling clothes." The people of this time thought it helped arms and legs to grow straight and strong. Mary does not want to lay her newborn baby on the cold floor of the cave. So can you imagine the sorrow Mary feels as she lays her baby in the only crib available, a food tray for cattle? In a cave perfumed with who knows what. I imagine that she bites her lip and takes a deep breath. Maybe the heart of God comes neither in Augustus Caesar in Rome, nor in King Herod in Jerusalem. Maybe the heart of

God also comes neither in a Republican nor in a Democrat. The heart of God comes in a baby lying in a food tray for animals, in a cave, in the back water village of Bethlehem. God takes the form of a baby wrapped tightly in oppressive swaddling clothes.

It is during a worship service in the Guatemala indigenous village of Tamariz that I first see them, on the last day of the Middle TN Presbytery's week long mission trip in July. A mother rocking her newborn son to sleep. Mother is thin, 5 feet tall, 15 years old, barefoot, two streaks of strawberry blond in coarse, waist-length, otherwise black hair. Blond streaks due to malnutrition. They live nearby in a thatch roof house with a dirt floor. No electricity or kerosene. Drinking water from a scum-filled pond in which pigs bathe. But Mother has a clean face, pink lace blouse, and embroidered skirt. Mother and baby with beautiful bronze skin. None of us can take our eyes off them. Mother rocking baby boy to sleep. God's love is palpable! We can actually touch God's love! Maybe we ourselves are touched by Jesus, who is God's love incarnate. Every time we are touched by love, mercy, or forgiveness, we are touched by Jesus. Every time we are touched by tenderness.

Conclusion

Henri Nouwen says, "God does not want us to be afraid, distant, or envious. God wants to come close, very close, so close that we can rest in the intimacy of God as children in their mother's arms.

"So God becomes a little baby. Who can be afraid of a little baby? A tiny little baby is completely dependent on its parents, nurses, and caregivers. Yes,

God wants to become so powerless as to be unable to eat or drink, walk, play, or work without the help of many people.

"Yes, God becomes dependent on human beings to grow up and live among us and proclaim the Good News. How can we fear a baby we rock in our arms? How can we hide from or envy a baby who smiles at us in response to our tenderness?"

Christmas is a time of many kinds of sentiment. So I know Christmas can cause sorrow to come into focus. Painful memories about failures and loved ones lost. But the good news of Christmas is that the heart of God joins human form. God and humanity are joined as a couple on their wedding day. So in Jesus, God feels our pain. When we weep, God weeps with us.

Can you see them? Mary rocking Jesus to sleep over here, near a feeding tray for cattle. Joseph and the shepherds cannot take their eyes off them. Come closer. Can you hear the beat of God's heart?

What do you hear when you hear the beat of God's heart? You hear that even for the likes of you and me gathered here in Brentwood, that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate you and me from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Merry Christmas from God!