

The Christmas Story: Luke 2:1-20
Christmas Eve
2013

Christmas is a mad dash. Every year, a few weeks before Thanksgiving, Caitlin and I have this conversation that goes thus: “We have got to make sure that Christmas does not get out of control this year. We want to enjoy Christmas, and last year (we say this every year), last year was crazy, and by the time we got to Christmas morning we were just exhausted. So let’s be careful with the calendar – if you’re going to put anything on the calendar let’s talk about it first. Let’s plan ahead, make lists, pick the stuff we really want to do. It would be so nice to really enjoy Christmas this year and not feel like it’s a mad dash.” So we have that conversation, every year. And then Christmas – this season that has a life of its own – just bowls right over us. It’s a mad dash, especially this year--Christmas seems to have come at least a week early.

But Christmas was always a mad dash. Listen again to the story that Luke tells. Emperor Augustus declared that all the world – all the Roman world – should be registered. This was a census, but instead of hiring thousands of people to go door to door, Augustus required every person to return to the town of his birth and register. Talk about a Christmas travel nightmare and a government-run disaster. Joseph had to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem. That’s 80 miles, on foot and donkey. A healthy person could make that trip in about 4 days, except Mary was pregnant. There would have been a fear of miscarriage, so the trip went much slower. It probably took them a week to make that journey,. When they got there, the town was full. There wasn’t a place to stay; they couldn’t call ahead, no reservations and everything was full. So they bunked down in a cave with the animals, and Mary went into labor. In a strange town, in an even stranger place, at an unexpected time, two young people engaged but not yet married, huddle down among the animals to welcome their first child into the world. A recent article in a farming magazine points out something that us non-farmers would never think of: thank God for the animals, because the animals kept them warm at night. The body heat from the livestock made that cave live-able for Mary and Joseph and the child in a feed trough.

The shepherds experienced their own mad dash. That night, as Mary and Joseph huddled in the cave, the shepherds were in the field at the end of a long day’s work. They were half asleep, half awake on an ordinary night, guarding their sheep. When out of nowhere, an angel appeared and scared them half to death. The angel said what angels always say: Do not be afraid. They announced that in Bethlehem, that day, a savior was born – for them – the one God had promised, the Lord.

Then suddenly a whole sky full of angel appeared singing glory to God, and they disappeared as quickly as they had come. The sky was black, and the shepherds ran. As fast as their feet could carry them, they ran into that crowded town looking in every stable – as shepherds they knew the local stables well – until they found what they were looking for. When they saw that child

lying there, they told everyone what the angels had told them and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

So I guess it's okay that Christmas is a mad dash, it always was – it was in the beginning. Except there is one line in this Christmas story that catches me off guard every time I read it. One line points to something beyond a mad dash, something deeper and something holy. As the shepherds told their story, all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. *But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.* Mary did not join in the excitement and madness of that first Christmas. She is over to the side, quietly holding her son, treasuring the words of the shepherds, letting them simmer in her heart.

What were the words of the shepherds? *For to you is born this day in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.* Mary had heard these words before. She too was visited by an angel, and the angel had said the same thing to her. Perhaps she had questioned herself then, maybe imagined she misheard or wondered if it was just a dream. But now it was *confirmed*, others in a different time and place had received the same message. A Savior – born this night, born from her, nestled in her arms. Talked about for generations, whispered about for hundreds of years, hoped for ages. And this is he. The one that the whole world has been waiting for.

This is the one you and I have` been waiting for. Not simply waiting for Christmas day to come, or waiting for the baby to show up in the creche -- but waiting for a savior. There is a longing in us for a savior; there is a need in us for one who will rescue us. It is not only the people of Israel that needed rescuing back then and there. It is not only the world that needs rescuing – though it does. There is much pain, too much pain in this world; pain that shows up in the news, and pain that never makes it to the news. Pain that is shared only among friends, only within the family; sadness that is born very close to the heart. The world needs rescuing, but not only the world. We need rescuing – you and I. We need someone to save us from our sin. We need someone to save us from our self-absorption, from living in our own world of needs and wants, as if we're the center of our own universe, the star of our own show. We need someone to rescue us from our spirit of judgment, criticizing anyone for just about anything, constantly seeking to blame instead of understand. We need someone to rescue us from our self-righteousness, believing that we do the right thing while everyone else needs help. And we need someone to rescue us from our fear: fear of a future we can't control, fear that we might be exposed as *not* the star after all; fear that we might actually be the one to blame; fear that if people saw us as we are, if we dropped the posing and posturing, they all might abandon us. We need to be rescued from that. And underneath it all, we need to be rescued from our shame; rescued from that moment in the still of the night, when we turn all the judgment and criticism and blaming that we cast out there onto ourselves.

So this is where we start – with ourselves, with our need to be rescued. The world needs saving, without a doubt; friends need rescuing, without a doubt; our communities, our families, our parents, our spouses, our children, we need to be rescued from a whole host of things. But I

can't start with them. It starts with me. I need to be rescued. The good news is that on Christmas Eve we are brought, we are led, to the One who can do the rescuing. Jesus Christ, the Human Son of God, is the one who can come to rescue. Letting him rescue me means I can stop being the center of my own universe, and let him be the center of the universe – he did create it. It means I don't need to pretend I'm perfect – he's perfect, and that's enough. I don't need to judge the world; he is the only Judge. I can stop criticizing, I can try with his help to have even half as much compassion as he has.

When I let the Rescuer rescue me, it means I can let go of my fear. The future belongs to him, and I belong to him, and no matter what comes, all will be well because he will make it so. You will be well, because he has forgiven you and accepted you and loved you into becoming the child, the person, he has created and destined you to be. You are accepted by God just as you are, and all the judgment and criticism you heap on myself he has removed and put away. For unto you is born this day a savior.

That's what the angel said, and Mary treasured these words and pondered them in her heart. This Christmas season in my sermons, I've been connecting the good news of God's grace to popular Christmas movies – and tonight is one of my favorites. "The Christmas Story" is the story of Ralphie, who has only one wish on that Christmas when he was nine years old in Hohman, Indiana: a Red Rider BB gun. At first his Mom said, with that famous line, "You'll shoot your eye out!" But he wanted it so badly, it was all he wanted. In a family as dysfunctional as any, growing up trying to find himself and be okay with himself, the greatest gift Ralphie could think of was a Red Rider BB gun – and he wouldn't get it. On Christmas morning, Ralphie tears through the gifts, hoping beyond hope that somehow Santa would have heard his plea even if his mother refused. But there was no BB gun – until his Old Man pointed to a half-hidden gift in the corner. Ralphie tore it open, and lo and behold there was a BB Gun. He took it outside for a test shot with a paper target attached to a metal sign. The BB ricocheted off the metal sign, back at him, hit his glasses knocked them off his face and he stepped on them trying to find them.

But, the film ends with Ralphie lying in bed on Christmas night with his gun by his side, and the narrator tells us that this was the best Christmas present he had ever received – or ever would receive. Why was it the best Christmas present ever? Because it was the one thing he wanted so badly – the one thing that would make him *okay*. At Christmas, God offers the one thing. The one thing we want so badly, the one thing we desperately need; the thing that will make us okay, more than okay, that will make us well. He offers himself, quietly, tucked away, half-hidden in a manger. The gift is ours receive by faith.

