

WONDROUS GIFTS AND THE PRICE OF A CUP OF COFFEE

Amos 5:14,15: Seek good and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, just as you have said, Hate evil and love good, and establish justice in the gate; it may be that the LORD, the God of hosts, will be gracious to the remnant of Joseph.

Luke 2:15-20 - ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!

Prayer: Let the Words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to You, O LORD, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen!

I have a short story to share with you about my 1 ½ year old Granddaughter, Cynthia, and the ornaments on the family Christmas tree in Mexico. After the Christmas tree was carefully and beautifully decorated before Thanksgiving, by the way, (Mine was put up at 2:45 p.m. on Christmas afternoon), Cynthia disappeared but finally returned to the tree holding a small broom and singing portions of the Piñata song. She was looking for the gift of candy and ready to smash every ornament to find that gift. My question to you is: Where would you fit into that scene as a Christian? We'll come back to that later in the sermon.

Come with me back to that night of all nights, some 2000 years ago.

There is a world with no hope, no expectations, no one to turn to, and no future.

There is a small town where no one expects a miracle and more than one cynic undoubtedly says, "Nothing ever happens here in Bethlehem." There are shepherds in the field who live a crude & often cruel and boring existence for the most part.

Then an angel of the Lord interrupts their dull lives and says: Don't be afraid for behold I bring to you good tidings of great joy. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior who is Christ the Lord.

"What the heck's going on here? (Revised Standard Version by the way)" the shepherds think as the angel continues, "And this will be a sign to you. You shall find the babe wrapped in 'swaddling' clothes and lying in a manger."

AND THEN COMES THE HEAVENLY CHORUS, possibly as good as Andy's choir, singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to all of good will."

Their world is changed! And what is their RESPONSE after seeing the child and his mother and father? *They make known what had been told them about this child; and everyone is amazed at the story of these crude shepherds.*

THERE IS A STAR, the original GPS system, although no nagging voice tells you "in two hundred yards turn your camel around and then turn west." I LOVE MY GPS. My errors in following directions and getting lost are as innumerable as the stars in the sky. I lose my way as easily as I misplace my wallet, my keys, my glasses and my cell phone. Thank God for the land phone in my house without which I often could not find my cell phone I simply dial that number and usually I find it unless I left it at church, in the car or in a restaurant.

THE WISE ONES WHOM WE ALSO CALL THE KINGS follow that STAR westward, searching for the King of Kings. And eventually they find Him. They worship Him, the King of the Jews, and BEING filled with 'exceeding great joy. They present their fine gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh and then return to their homes in the east knowing they have found the One! And their lives are changed. AND THEY, MY FRIENDS, have found their Lord and King at considerable cost and sacrifice.

WE, TOO, LIVE IN A WORLD IN WHICH, FOR FAR TOO MANY, THERE APPEARS TO BE NO HOPE, NO EXPECTATIONS, NO ONE TO TURN TO, AND NO FUTURE.

WHERE IS THE ANGEL WHO ANNOUNCES GOOD NEWS? WHERE ARE THE ANGELS WHO FILL THE HEAVENS WITH "GLORY TO GOD IN THE HIGHEST AND ON EARTH PEACE, GOOD WILL?"

WHERE IS THE STAR THAT LEADS US TO THE HOLY ONE OF GOD?

We don't hear the Angelic proclamation in the quietness of a shepherd's field. We live in a smorgasbord of unending sound even when we enter worship on Sunday mornings. Have you noticed that we do not easily tolerate quietness, the spiritual silence that leads us into the presence of God, even in worship?

BUT THERE ARE VOICES OF ANGELS AND STARS TO FOLLOW THAT LEAD US AND OTHERS TO THE HOLY ONE!

THERE ARE ANGELS WHO PROCLAIM THE GOOD NEWS IF... IF WE ARE QUIET AND STILL ENOUGH TO HEAR WHAT GOD WANTS US TO PROCLAIM IN WORD AND IN ACTION. AND IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW OLD OR YOUNG YOU AND I ARE! WE MAY BE THOSE ANGELS.

Let me share a few examples with you:

I hear the angels singing as you sing O HOLY NIGHT on Christmas Eve. Sometimes I hardly know where Andy and I are playing as *your* voices proclaim the wondrous news. Now it may be that certain voices are lubricated with more than coffee, juice, and tea. Nevertheless, the congregation becomes the heavenly choir of angels for me.

Years ago I received a letter from a college student who said to me: "When you came to see me I felt as if I were breathing fresh air again." I wasn't really that special but I was available and GOD WORKS MIRACLES THROUGH OUR AVAILABILITY as our lives and actions say, "I bring you Good News."

Another example occurred for me two Sundays ago during the music Sunday at the second service. I realized that there were three young boys, Liam, Andrew, and Aaron, standing by the organ, watching intently as Andy and I were playing the postlude. I felt an intense pleasure and reassurance sweep over me, knowing that I have never received a more sincere and innocent compliment from anyone. I don't know if their parents would call them angels. But I would because God revealed a wonderful pleasure to me in those few minutes. And for me, they were the true stars who pointed me in the right direction at that moment.

Our nation worships the 'stars' of entertainment. Ben Stein commented in his last column:

I no longer think Hollywood stars are terribly important.a man or woman who makes a huge wage for memorizing lines and reciting them in front of a camera is no longer my idea of a shining star we should all look up to. How can a man or woman who makes an eight-figure wage and lives in insane luxury really be a star in today's world, if by a 'star' we mean someone bright and powerful and attractive as a role model?

A real star, the kind who haunts my memory night and day, is the U.S. soldier in Baghdad who saw a little girl playing with a piece of unexploded ordinance on a street where he was guarding a station. He pushed her aside and threw himself on it just as it exploded. He left a family desolate in California and a little girl alive in Baghdad.

There are plenty of other stars in the American firmament... the police men and women who go off on patrol in South Central and have no idea if they will return alive; the orderlies and paramedics who bring in people who have been in terrible accidents and prepare them for surgery; the teachers and nurses who throw their whole spirits into caring for autistic children, the kind.... And he continues with more illustrations.

YOU AN I MAY BE THE 'REAL STARS' IN TODAY'S WORLD. THAT STAR 2000 YEARS AGO WAS NOT THE MESSAGE, THE HOPE, BUT IT LED OTHERS TO THE REDEEMING ONE. AND THAT IS THE KIND OF STAR WE NEED TO BE.

Think of those who meet on Saturday mornings to meet the emergency needs within our community, of those who feed the hungry, sleep with the homeless, build homes for

strangers. Think of those who teach respect by showing respect instead of demanding it by brute force. Think of Christian Educators, secretaries, sextons, singers of songs and hymns, cooks, and..., you name it. All of these servants lead those around us to the Christ, the Son of God, and our Redeemer.

So where does the cup of coffee come in? The things I have said are easy and almost mushy to many of us. But what I want to end with is the call to sacrifice in doing the Gospel.

Do you ever get tired of receiving letters from charity organizations and even your church about the need for money? I suspect we all do. But then I think to myself, "Do the poor get tired of being poor, the sick of being sick, the lonely of being alone, the lame of being unable to walk, the paraplegic of having no control over most of his or her body?"

Not all of us can go to Baghdad and lay down our lives for some poor, innocent child. But all of us can give so that others may live.

You know how poorly we have done on our budget pledging for the coming year. Do you realize that if each of our *giving* units gave the price of a daily cup of coffee – I'm thinking of a dollar cup of coffee, not McDonalds-- we would be able to raise our giving over \$100,000 and do so much in the name of that Babe in the manger who came so that we and all might have Life Eternal.

Now back to Cynthia and her Christmas tree. You and I are like the ornaments on that tree, sometimes in danger of being smashed even in innocence often by people, our own friends, in the church as we reflect the lights and joys of this Christmastide. Peter and Paul could hardly stand each other but they served out Lord until martyrdom. Paul and Barnabas fought and split up but the Gospel was preached and the work of the church went on and continues to move forward. And because of that goal to serve Christ we must forgive one another and we must be forgiven so the Gospel is proclaimed and lived out among us and in the world.

ISN'T IT WONDERFUL THAT WE CAN GIVE BECAUSE WE HAVE RECEIVED THE WONDROUS GIFT? ALL THAT WE GIVE AND ALL THAT WE LIVE ARE ANGELIC PROCLAMATIONS AND STARLIGHT, SHOWING THE WORLD THE GREATEST GIFT OF LIFE IN ALL ETERNITY. AMEN!