

“Why We Need Jesus: For Comfort in Need”

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Luke 1:39-56

First Presbyterian Church

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Last week I told you about my friend and mentor, New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson, who went Christmas shopping with his daughter at a particularly tony mall in Atlanta. The lights, the noise, the press of people, and above all the sheer luxury of everything: it was just too much. Luke was overwhelmed with the urgent need to escape. “All of a sudden I was struck,” he said, “there is nothing in this place that anybody really needs; and furthermore, nothing anyone really needs is in this place.” (At the 1998 meeting of the Moveable Feast, personal notes, and cited by Bob Dunham, *Expecting God’s Surprises*, p. 56).

Today is the second in our brief Advent series this month, as we explore together what it is we *really* need, and where it is we look to find it. In this season of preparing for the birth of Christ, it may seem obvious to say that what we really need is Jesus -- not just the sweet baby Jesus, but the compelling Savior that this baby turned out to be. Last week we began with our need for the cosmic Christ, who comes to save the world ... *Christus Victor*, whom we must lift our eyes to see. Today we address our need for the incarnate Lord, who descends to us, who comes near to bring us comfort in our need.

One of my friends in ministry moved to Manhattan in 2002, the year after the World Trade Center fell, to serve as the associate pastor at Brick Church. Having moved there from Buffalo, Doug King was eager to take in as much of the culture as the city had to offer. That year, he remembers, the Guggenheim was hosting an exhibit of Norman Rockwell paintings. Maybe that’s just what was needed that year, he thought – Mom and Pop pictures, “a moment of escape, a brief calming tonic to a city ... walloped by violence and tragedy.” But he couldn’t help thinking that the cover of the Saturday Evening Post was not going to offer much “nourishment for a wounded soul” that faced New York in 2002. And it also made

him ponder how every year, our popular culture portrays Christmas “as a time of constant joy ... when in reality it is quite often a minefield of emotional pain for many of us.” Commercials bombard us with what we should buy to make our loved ones happy, while

“empty chairs around the table remind us of loved ones who have died and relationships that have been broken. ... [There is so much about this season] that seems hollow and aloof from the reality of our human condition. What a strange predicament for a holiday based on the incarnation.” (From his 2002 Moveable Feast paper.)

And what strange contrast to the Scripture of this season, that speaks of a God who responds so compassionately to our human predicament, who is so thoroughly aware of our need for a Savior. Mary sings:

“My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.  
...He has lifted up the lowly;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
... He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy.”

This doesn't sound like an aloof God to me. But the God of Scripture never does. From the prophecy of Isaiah to the prophecy of Mary's song, Scripture, Doug King reminds us,

“does not ... wallpaper over the cracks in the walls of our humanity .... [It] reminds us of why we need a Saviour .... Christmas is not some coronation of our personal joy but the stark realization that God has made the ultimate effort to reach into the midst of our brokenness and lift us up.

“Sometimes we need to hear that suffering is a normal part of living. We need to be told that our weakness and our pain is exactly the reason for the season. The radical act of God's birth into our midst is about a powerful response to

just these issues. We are awaiting our saviour,” Doug wryly reminds us; “not a party planner.”

Yet it is also true that we may not want to hear that we need a Savior ... we may not want to be told that Jesus is God’s response to our weakness and pain. I don’t know about you, but I for one, and I suspect most of us, try so hard to keep our worries to ourselves ... to make the bottom line look good ... to keep the veneer of well-being intact. And the last thing we’re longing to hear is that we are somehow “needy.” One writer goes so far to say that

“this is the Christmas story that no one wants to hear. It’s why we talk instead about Santa, chestnuts, and winter wonderland. We cannot bear to see ourselves as God sees us. We cannot bear to know ourselves as exiles, captives who need to be shown the way home. We want to see ourselves as ‘found,’ ‘saved,’ magnanimous in sharing ... with the unfortunate, but not as lost ... ourselves. We would rather be sentimental than desperate. We would rather dig deep at the mall than know ourselves as needy.” (Ehrich, Tom. "Exiles & Wilderness" from *On a Journey: Meditations on God in Daily Life*, December 6, 2006. Email subscription service [www.onajourney.org](http://www.onajourney.org). This was brought to my attention by Diane Lloyd.)

But, of course, we really are. And, of course, deep down, we already know it.

Some years ago, Joanna Adams, a mentor to me from way back, served as an associate pastor at Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta, Georgia. Central is known for its ministry in the city – serving the poor and homeless in hands-on ways, and working with political leaders to change the grip of poverty in that place. Early in her ministry, fresh out of seminary, Joanna saw a desperate need and proceeded to open a homeless shelter in her church. One of her favorite volunteers was a young advertising exec who volunteered week after week to roll up his sleeves to wash the homeless people’s feet. He was *always* nicely put together --

straight out of *GQ* is how Joanna put it. She asked him once why he came back every week, and he said the most amazing thing: ‘I figured Jesus meant what he said in [the gospel] about ministering to the ‘least of these.’ I figure I stand the best chance I’ve got in these days of encountering the spirit of Christ here. ... Besides, these guys and I are not all that different. They wear their brokenness on the outside. I wear mine on the inside. But brokenness is brokenness. It is the condition that we share’” (From a sermon preached 11/29/02 at Trinity Church, Atlanta, cited by Bob Dunham in *Expecting God’s Surprises*, pp. 83-4).

They wear their brokenness on the outside; I wear mine on the inside, but condition of brokenness is the condition – the human condition -- that we share. And most astonishingly, it is that human condition that God chose to share with us, 2000 years ago, when he took on human flesh, and was born in a stable, and grew to walk among the scared and broken, and heal the sick, and kneel among his friends to wash their feet.

God isn’t afraid of our brokenness. God doesn’t “paper over the cracks in the walls of our humanity” ... but reaches right into our fragile lives to lift us up. God doesn’t offer just a reprieve from sorrow ... but a reminder that our human condition is exactly “the reason for the season.”

It was last year at Westmoreland that finally got to me. I had gone along with Presbyterian Women to Christmas carol to the men and women at the Westmoreland nursing home in town. About eight of us had driven over there; I remember it was an exceedingly cold night, not unlike our recent single digit temperatures. We gathered in the first floor “activity room,” where two dozen residents were waiting for us. They sat in wheelchairs, mostly, though some had come in walkers and a couple even made due with canes. It was truly a touching if somewhat morose sight: all of the infirm gathered in their modest hope, and this paltry if game group of aging women creaking out the carols. It was Peg Bramhall I think who played the piano, which helped a lot; at least we were on tempo, and close enough to tune. We were also dearly grateful that the young guitarist who had

just been playing and was packing up to leave decided to stay to help us out. We clearly needed it.

We started with the chipper songs: “Joy to the World,” “Deck the Halls,” then on to “Good King Wenceslas” which few of us knew, and “We Three Kings” whose six verses seemed to run on interminably. Some of the residents, the ones who could hear anyway, hummed along or even sang, and all of them bobbed their heads in gracious appreciation.

When we got to “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” –

“It came upon the midnight clear, that glorious song of old, from angels bending near the earth, to touch their harps of gold: “Peace on the earth, good will to men, from heaven’s all gracious king”: the world in solemn stillness lay, to hear the angels sing.”

And I thought, how sad, that they need to hear the angels sing, and what they get instead is us.

And then we came to the second verse:

“And ye, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow.”

And Kristie Finley and I who were standing next to each other exchanged a look because we suddenly realized that the very men and women in front of us, the blind, the lame, the halt, were the ones to whom this carol is addressed: whose load of ill health and probably loss of a spouse may well be a crushing load indeed, and whose forms were permanently stooped, bent low by age and myriad ills, whose steps were obviously painful and slow. And the carol went on, and though tears were in our eyes now, we kept singing:

“Look now! for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing. O rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing.”

Jesus came because we needed him. Because we still need him. All who are weary, and anyone who has toiled along the climbing way, and everyone in our world still bent low by crushing loads, of illness or poverty, sorrow or fear or sheer

exhaustion. “Come to me,” Jesus said, “all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me. For I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest – you will find rest -- for your souls” (Matthew 11:28-29). Amen.