

“Shine, Jesus, Shine”
Luke 2:1-20

What a difference a year makes. Last year as we prepared to celebrate Christmas I doubt that many of us had given any thought at all to what a “bail-out” might be all about. But this year probably all of us have some combination of anxieties, opinions, and questions about all of the news we hear. We hear from supposed experts that they simply could not have foreseen this happening. We have been introduced to the notion of “too big to allow to fail.”

Luke gives us a specific context for telling us of the birth of Jesus. He puts it in the specific circumstances of what might easily be look at as an ancient bail-out scheme decreed by the Emperor Augustus, implemented by his appointed governors including Cyrenius. Empires come and go but the concept of “too big to fail” is nothing new at all, and my hunch is that among those trudging to their various hometowns including those who made the journey to Bethlehem there were more than a few opinions and mutterings about this bail out scheme among the fellow travelers.

Luke does not avoid or evade the circumstances that God has chosen, but the gospel is never defined by the atmosphere that surrounds it. The gospel always has its power very potently compacted within itself. This is nowhere more true than in the birth of Jesus.

Our celebration of Christmas has a way of awakening memories that have shaped us from years past. One memory I cherish is the Christmas when my daughter was three years old. We were all involved in the rush of the season’s activities, there was so much we wanted to accomplish. One day I picked her up from the pre-school she attended, and she was very excited about the Christmas pageant they were having the next day. I asked her what part she had in the pageant. Her face was just beaming as she exclaimed, “I’m going to be the star!” Being a former thespian I was immediately filled with fatherly pride. “That is wonderful! You mean you were chosen to play the part of Mary? That is great, Meredith!”

“No, Dad, I didn’t say that. I’m not going to be Mary. I’m going to be the star!”

It took me a minute to slow down and catch on. Finally, it dawned on me, “O, you mean you are going to be the star. That is great.” I was being really thick here, and I added a question, “So, what do you?”

She didn’t miss a beat, “Don’t be silly, Dad, I do just what a star does. I stand there and shine!” My daughter knew what stars really do.

God knows all about bail-out plans. The birth of Jesus is the most potent bailout plan of all. In his wisdom God did not choose a plan that makes us ooh and

aww at how spectacular it is, or cringe at the number of zeroes it contains, numbers we can't even imagine. God's plan is always expressed by love and love is never best expressed by how big something is; love is most potent when it is most intimate, when it is expressed with care and true humility. God's plan for the salvation of the world was born in circumstances that were simple, humble, ordinary. That is still true today; love at its best is always simple, humble, ordinary. That is the grace that truly allows us to shine, simply shine. It is pure gift. That is what makes our worship radiant, when we come together to adore Christ.

Our adoration can be expressed in many ways that shine. In this congregation we are grateful to be led by the Glory Group in their Christmas Project. Names of specific children were gathered, including their desires, their clothing sizes, funds were raised, shopping was done, the gifts were wrapped one by one. Last Tuesday we delivered gifts for 98 children to Palmetto Elementary School. One member shared this with me. She said that she had been feeling a heaviness this season because of several recent losses, but in the simple act of faith of coming down to the Fellowship Hall to help in the wrapping of gifts, a heaviness had been lifted from her. Just that simple, humble, ordinary. That is all part of God's plan, not a bail-out plan, a plan of salvation for the whole world. Come, let us adore him. Let us shine, simply shine, wherever we are whatever our circumstances.

As you know, one of our Members and former Lay Leader is serving with the American Red Cross in Baghdad, Iraq. This past week we received an email with Christmas Greetings for our church, and I would like to close by sharing it with you. Bob writes,

"At a time when I find myself in a place far from the usual trappings of the Christmas season, yet closer to the actual location of the first Christmas than I have ever been in my life, I want to take this opportunity to wish you and Christine, and the entire congregation of FUMC Palmetto a joyous and peaceful Christmas day. Looking around at the concrete barriers, military vehicles, dust and soldiers carrying weapons, it doesn't look much like Christmas, but I can feel a sense of the season as I talk to people each day.

"Last Sunday, my team leader and I attended a traditional Protestant chapel service at a lake side building that has been converted into a house of worship. It appears that the location was originally some sort of recreation area and the view across the lake is quite serene, yet surreal. What is sometimes hard to believe, is that across the lake in one direction is one of Saddam Hussein's palaces, which is now a military headquarters, in another direction one sees the bombed out building that was once the Baath party headquarters and there is also a view of the never-completed "Victory Over Iran and America" palace. However, the scenery was not the focus in the small building in which was gathered a group of men and women who found a way to set aside the hostile situation in which they toil, and seek peace through Christ. We may have sung to the accompaniment of

a guitar in the absence of an organist, but the traditional Christmas hymns were just as beautiful to me, and maybe even a little more inspiring this time around.

“Being one person, I obviously can’t meet all of the several thousand military members deployed to this sprawling complex of camps, but judging by those I have met and talked to by phone when relaying emergency messages, the men and women in uniform are fine representatives of America and their desire for peace in this troubled land is strong. What a blessing it is to be spending Christmas in the midst of them.

Thank you for sending the packet of “news” from home and the new Upper Room will allow me to not miss a beat with my morning ritual. Peace to you all!”

Whatever our circumstances this Christmas, let us each look for simple, humble, ordinary ways to shine with the love of Christ. O come let us adore him.

Rev Stephen Hoffman
First United Methodist Church of Palmetto
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