

OUR WORLD MAY NOT BE PERFECT, BUT GOD'S LOVE IS NO MISTAKE

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Isn't it just a winter wonderland right here in North Canton, Ohio! It's just like Bing Crosby described back in 1951, and then Perry Como in 1968, and again, The King in 1971, Elvis, that is: "City sidewalks, busy sidewalks, dressed in holiday style; in the air there's a feeling of Christmas. Children laughing, people passing, meeting smile after smile, and on every street corner you'll hear, 'Silver bells, silver bells, it's Christmas time in North Canton. Ring-a-ling, hear them ring. Soon it will be Christmas Day.'" Perhaps you had another of Bing Crosby's big hits on your mind: "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the ones I used to know, where the treetops glisten, and children listen to hear sleigh bells in the snow." Personally speaking, I'm a Mel Torme kind of guy: "Chestnuts roasting on an open fire, Jack Frost nipping at your nose, yule tide carols being sung by a choir, and folks dressed up like Eskimos; everybody knows a turkey and some mistletoe help to make the season bright; tiny tots with their eyes all aglow will find it hard to sleep tonight." I love them all; and with the snow falling on Wednesday, the sidewalks shoveled, lights aglow, presents wrapped, what could be more beautiful! What could be more perfect! Oh, I know that those "busy streets" weren't so busy most of yesterday morning, and that the electricity was off in many parts of town well into the evening for many, and still today for some. Dreaming of a white Christmas may be a whole lot of fun, but living with ice on the roads, the trees, electrical wires led to a good deal of havoc. Retailers are reeling from the wintry blast, along with Ohio Bell lineman - or is it Ameritech, no, SBC - and don't forget the folks at Ohio Power and AEP, and double duty for police and emergency workers. I guess a little bit of winter wonderland isn't all that wonderful for many. And it's not just about the weather. It's about the contrast between myth and reality, between images from Hollywood and bouts with real life. What could be more perfect? How about a world with a little less war? How about a town with a different kind of Hoover, one that still cared about North Canton? How about a more vibrant job market, and families a little more perfect than the ones we have in real life? It's Christmas time, with hustle and bustle on the rise, along with depression, lots of stress and a little bit of desperation underneath the holiday facade.

No, it's not a perfect world. Far from it, ours is a world where lovers stumble, couples split, and families suffer. Ours is a world where the ministries of Food Pantries and Giving Trees remind us of how vulnerable we are. Ours is a world where Uncle Billys send good and decent people like George Baileys over the edge, over the bridge, and into the cold abyss of the water below. No, it's not a perfect world. It's not always a wonderful life. But you know what? Do you know what the Good News is that we celebrate tonight? This is the world God loves. We are the people - the George Baileys and the Uncle Billys - whom God has chosen to love and to bless with the presence of Christ. God didn't make a mistake. God didn't misfigure, or somehow forget that ours is a world where bottoms fall out and roofs cave in, where sinners make

mistakes, and fail to recognize what's good for them, even when what's good for them comes in the form of immaculate conceptions and virgin births, adorable babies like Jesus who become crucified Saviors like Christ.

God knew what He was doing in sending the Babe in the manger. God knows what the world is like. God knows what our lives are like. And He cares, more than any of us can imagine; and not only does He care, but He is with us, even when we're not in the mood, or nowhere to be found, just plain mad, or numb with indifference. God knows who we are. God knows where we are. And He sent His Son - not an unknowing hired hand, not a computer telemarketer, not a customer service representative somewhere in India. God sent His Son, a part of Himself, His most beloved emissary, who did more than deliver a message. He gave his life, and his love, and his all, for you and for me, personally and individually. This is the world God loves. Yours is the life God sent His Son to save. As Paul writes in Romans, nothing can separate us from the life-giving embrace of God's love - not God's judgment, not our sin, not the rules of righteousness, not even the claims of death. No power of any kind, nothing in this world nor the next, nothing we've done nor ever could do, nothing, absolutely nothing will ever be able to separate us from God's love, from God's life, from God's promise to be with us, to be for us, here in the present and to the end of the age. [Romans 8:37-39] That's the Good News we celebrate tonight. That's Good News that we can bank on and trust in forever.

Christmas is a time of year when, despite our best intentions and in spite of all the reminders surrounding us, it is easy to get distracted by all the busyness of the season and miss its main point, that God loves us, just as we are - that's right, just as we are. Sure, there's always room for improvement; but God is not waiting for us to improve before extending the unconditional pledge of his never-ending love. I ran across an interesting poem about Christmas while surfing on the internet that captures well some of the sentiments I've just expressed. I'm not going to share the entire poem, but the verses I've selected effectively capture its point, and mine.

"Our world need not be perfect, our lives don't have to shine,
For God to share the miracle of becoming human from divine.

This news is both good and great;
It is reason to sing and celebrate,

Not to pretend that all is well, nor to ignore our fears and sadness.
But to realize that in Christ comes the source of Christian gladness,
To recognize we're not alone, that God is here abiding,
And to understand the Christian truth, that original glad tiding.

Tonight is not about pretending that everything is fine.
It's not about inventing a life that's all stable and sublime.
Instead, I'll suggest right here, in this unpolished, amateurish verse
That Christmas is God's promise to bring good from what we've made worse.

And that is why, I do believe, our God came here to dwell,
And why we should sing tonight of the gift Emmanuel.
God loves us in our weakness. God loves us when we fail.
God calls us in our worship and through this ancient tale
To step out in faith and courage, to be bold and brave and free,

**To remember that God has promised to love us, you and me ..."
... in Jesus' Name. Amen**