

Straight Talk on Christmas Eve

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None would deny that it has been one extraordinary year for folks here at Zion, in the country, and around the world. I'm not saying that it has been an extraordinarily good year, just that it has been a year like none other. The inauguration of our first black President in January is certainly something that cannot be duplicated; but the financial meltdown that set the table for one of America's youngest Presidents has made his term and our world uniquely different. To watch a lifetime of savings drop in value almost catastrophically makes it hard not to be suspicious now that paper values have made an important comeback. If piling on is in order, unemployment is higher, much higher, and it's hitting closer to home more and more. That 24-hour news cycle magnifies the stress by making it clear that these stories are affecting lives and communities in more places than we might imagine. Certainly, living right next door to the Hoover Company confirms our worries that you've got to be a full-blown mixture of optimist, idealist, never-say-die positive thinker to keep your head up looking for the silver lining in these never-ending clouds covering northeast Ohio. I'm not here to say I see the silver lining, or that you should see the glass as always half-full rather than half-empty; but we do have a story right at the heart of our Christmas tradition that makes it clear that God can relate to the precarious circumstances we call our life because that's precisely the world our Lord experienced with his birth, through his death, and at every turn along the way.

Martin Luther does a great job in this compilation of sermons called *The Martin Luther Christmas Book* capturing the irony and horror of a God who meets us in the flesh and blood of Jesus the baby and in Jesus the man. He begins with the premise that we would want to have been there when the divine life of our Cosmic Creator touched down on earth with the birth of the Baby Jesus, presuming, of course, that we would have done better than the indifferent innkeeper, the *too-busy-to-notice* guests, the *what's-in-it-for-me* Herod, or the *what-have-you-done-for-me lately* townsfolk and village people, who remained skeptical, suspicious, and downright resistant from the very beginning in Bethlehem to Jesus' last breath on the Cross. Here's how Luther says it in talking about Mary and the circumstances of Jesus' birth: "There she was in a strange place without the least thing needed for child birth – no light, no fire, in the dead of night, thick with darkness. No one came to give assistance of any kind. The guests were enjoying themselves in the inn; and no one paid any attention to the young mother-to-be. Think, people! There was no one to bathe the Baby. No warm water, nor even cold. No fire, no light. The mother herself, midwife and maid. The cold manger serving as bed and bathtub. Who showed the poor girl what to do? She had never had a baby before. I'm amazed the little one didn't freeze. Don't make Mary out to be an unfeeling stone. It must have gone straight to her heart that she was so abandoned. She was flesh and blood, with heart and feelings, and she must have felt miserable – and Joseph, too – that she was left in this way, all alone, with no one to help, in a strange land in the middle of winter." [*The Martin Luther Christmas Book*, pp. 38-39]

Talk about pondering these things in her heart, I'm sure Mary had much to ponder as she thought about the journey of believing in God's faithfulness and love as a fourteen-year old, on a joy ride to Bethlehem, joined by a skeptical Joseph on an overloaded worn-out donkey, with a cattle stall for a room, and a feeding trough as a cradle. That was Jesus' introduction to life among us; and it didn't get any better with the historic flight to Egypt – and I'm not talking "flight" as in Boeing's new *787 Dreamliner*. A dream did come to Joseph, one that said, "Get on up and get out of here!" So, they took off and fled. It might have been safe to return after a while, but it still wasn't safe to be Jesus, who was accused of being off-kilter, out of place, and out of his mind, before being betrayed by a friend, abandoned by his followers, rejected by the crowds, and crucified by authorities who could not substantiate a single charge against him. What we have here with the Good News of Christ's birth – and Jesus' life – is a bulletin from the heights of heaven. It is not immutable laws preserving order and protecting life that form the core of what we know about the universe. It is vulnerability, with an amazing capacity for resiliency, that beats at the heart of the cosmos, and forms the core of our lives as individual, as families, and as communities.

The poets call it life's *ebb and flow*, but that sounds kind of cyclical, without direction, going round and round. Scientists call it *creative destruction*, but that sounds kind of harsh and alarming; and it is all of that, and more. The Bible calls it something else. The Hebrew word is *chesed*, and Gabriel Marcel, iconic French atheist existentialist turned stalwart Christian, wrote a book about it entitled *Creative Fidelity*. It was a book about God's love. In it he maintains that although we don't know exactly "how", we do know there will be a "when", when God will find a way, sometimes surprisingly, if need be, creatively, to prove His faithfulness and fulfill His promise to color our lives with His grace, and fill them in between the lines with generous measures of His infinite love. That's the truth that beats at the heart of who God is. He knows we're vulnerable. In Jesus, he has joined the club, not to join our laments, but to share our burdens – all of them. That's the point of the Incarnation. God knows every nook and cranny of the human condition. He understands our vulnerability, and empowers our resiliency with the hopes to believe in, because of the faithfulness He promises, and the love, the overflowing love, through which He changes our lives forever.

I could stand here, and, based on our faith, encourage you to keep your chin up. Don't give in to fear, or ever give up on yourself, because quitters never win and winners never quit, because when the going gets tough the tough get going; and if it's getting tough financially, always remember what Yogi said: "I started out with nothing, and I've still got most of that left." But I'm not standing in the pulpit to give you a pep talk. If it's warm fuzzies and a pat on the back you want, read Jack Canfield's *Chicken Soup for the Soul* (all eleven volumes). If it's a kick in the pants you want, read Vince Lombardi's *When Pride Still Mattered*. If you want to contribute to someone else's success, then buy their book on the secret to success. If you want to unlock the powers of the heavens right here on earth, then that's why we're here. That's what God has done with the birth of Christ in Bethlehem, through the death of Jesus at Calvary, with the victory of our Risen Lord, triumphant over the grave back then and alive among us today. This God is our strength in times of weakness, a light to lighten our darkness, the source of our peace today, hope for tomorrow, and a joy that lasts forever, as we take up the lives God has given, living freely, fully, and faithfully ... in Jesus' name. Amen