



Rev Chris Taylor - 12/30/18
"A Christmas Story"

Back in November when a group from our church visited Israel, we went to Bethlehem and to an area called "The Shepherds' Field." We stood on a steep hillside looking down into a valley. In the fields along the bottom we could see some sheep. Behind us were natural caves that would have offered shelter from wind and storms. The valley itself led up to the left where it climbed a distant hill where the city of Bethlehem was located. That's where Jesus was born. That's where we had just visited the Church of the Nativity. It would have been maybe a two hour hike for any shepherd standing where we were.

Shepherds in Jesus' time weren't exactly outcasts, but they were the next closest thing. They lived out on the fringes, and were invariably poor; owning no land, no livestock, nothing but the clothes on their backs. Apart and often alone, these were people who were all but forgotten by the rest of the population.

There is a message, then, in the fact that it was to the shepherds that the angels appeared: that they were the ones who first heard the news of Jesus' birth; the ones who were the very first to worship him. It tells us that even the poor and the neglected – perhaps, most especially the poor and the neglected – have a place in God's heart. And it reminds us that no matter how far we may have fallen, or how painful or difficult our lives might have become, God has not forgotten us. God never forgets, never abandons us. We all, in other words, have a place in the heart of our Creator. We are "God's beloved."

If that is true of us, of course, then it is true of everyone around us, as well: true of the neighbor who can be so obnoxious; true of the classmate who is so easy to ignore; true of the weak and the oppressed; the starving, naked and poor. Which raises the question: who will tell them they aren't forgotten? How are they going to find out that they, too, are among God's beloved?

About seventeen hundred years ago there was a man who devoted his life to doing just that. He was the only child of some very wealthy parents. They were devout Christians, and they raised him in the faith, and when they died during an epidemic he inherited their fortune. This young man then spent the rest of his life giving that fortune away, He became a priest, and then a bishop of a city along the southern coast of present-day Turkey. During his lifetime, he became famous for his generosity, his care and his compassion. His name was Nicholas, and within a couple of hundred years he was widely recognized as a saint.

Perhaps the most famous story of St. Nicholas' generosity concerned a poor man who had three young daughters. Back then it was the father's responsibility to offer a prospective husband something of value. It was called a dowry. It could be livestock, or money or land, but there needed to be something. This poor father, though, had absolutely nothing, and without a dowry that meant there would be no marriage for his daughters. It was a given that at some point he would have to sell each one of them into servitude just to ensure their survival.

Realizing what lay ahead for this man and his daughters, Nicholas secretly visited their home as each daughter came of age and left a bag of gold. In some versions of the story, he actually tossed the gold through an open window and it landed in their stockings or shoes which had been left before the fire to dry. The gifts were redemptive and life changing. Because of them, each daughter was able to marry.

There are lots of other stories that grew up around Nicholas through the years – saving children, saving sailors out at sea. By the Middle Ages, devotion to him had spread throughout Europe and thousands of churches were dedicated to him including the cathedral in Italy where his remains are now interred.

Nicholas died on December 6, 343; and so December 6th became his feast day in the Church. In Holland, it became a common practice for children to put their shoes out the night before his feast day, and in the morning they would discover the gifts that St. Nicholas had left. Gradually “Sint Nikolaas” was shortened to “Sinterklass” and in the 1700's, Dutch immigrants to this country brought Sinterklass with them, planting the seeds for that plump, bearded, red clad figure we know today as Santa Claus.

And it all goes back to a single individual seventeen hundred years ago who decided to use what he had been given to share God's love with those in need.

Oprah Winfrey has her own story of that kind of love. It happened not after she became one of the richest people in the world, but years before, back when she was just twelve years old, and she and her mother, her half-sister and brother were living in poverty. No electricity. No running water. That was the Christmas when Oprah's mother announced there would be no celebration, and that not even Santa would be showing up because they were just too poor.

Oprah was crushed. It wasn't the lack of gifts that bothered her most. No, it was what she would say when she got back to school. She just knew that everyone would be talking about the gifts they received and all the wonderful things that had happened. But she would have nothing to share – no story, no excitement, no laughter or fun. What she felt was an overwhelming sense of shame.

That night three nuns showed up at their door. They brought food, and they brought gifts for each of the children. For Oprah it was like some great light had suddenly her life. She was overjoyed; overjoyed because now, she too, would have a story to tell.

Saint Nicholas bringing gifts to an impoverished family. Three nuns showing up at the home of a family that was struggling. And with those simple acts, love was shared and lives were changed.

We might not be able to change the world, but there isn't a person here who can't in some way, in some form, make a difference in someone else's life. We are called to ministry. We are called to be Christ's hands and feet in this world, and our mission field is right where we are with the people we already know. Wherever we live, wherever we work, we can bring God's love to those that we encounter.

Love was made visible on that Christmas day so long ago. Continuing to make that love real and visible has been the call of Jesus' followers ever since. As

we stand at the edge of a whole new year, I want to invite you to make a difference in someone's life this coming year; decide right now to let the people around you know the same thing those shepherd discovered so long ago: that they too are God's children; that they, too, are and will always be God's beloved.

That's a mission I hope every one of us can readily embrace.