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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2012, Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7, Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁶And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:6-7, KJV)

The innkeeper had turned away Mary and Joseph from his inn. No room there. Let us not be too hard on the man. It is not that he refused to give them room, as if he didn't like the look of them, but rather he was *unable* to give them room. His inn was already full. So, he turned them away. Still, as they trudged onward, he might have looked with deep sympathy upon the young woman, so heavy with child, and upon her husband, Joseph.

Likewise with yon man in the dining room of the inn: he sits at his supper table, warm and glad to be enjoying a good meal. He glances out the window and, behold: the mother of God, carrying her weight off to the stable, her head down, choosing her steps carefully because she does not want to fall and hurt herself or this Baby! The man in the dining room notices her and Joseph and wishes them well, we hope. Maybe he says a passing prayer for them.

Who could not look at young Mary, so heavy with child, and not have pity for her and a desire to help?

Oh! Cherish that impulse. It is one of the very best things about you, about me. Indeed, it is much in the spirit of Jesus Christ himself. Who could not look upon young Mary, so heavy with child, and not have pity on her and a desire to help?

A CHRISTMAS CAROL

Earlier this year, I read Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*. Strange that I could have lived all these years and never actually read this little masterpiece till now. All the world knows the story of Scrooge and his "Bah! Humbug!" and Bob Cratchit and Tiny Tim and Marley's Ghost and all the rest. The story is part of popular culture, part of our consciousness, yet I found it very moving to actually settle down and read the text. There is a lovely edition available for free on Kindle. It includes the original drawings and painting that accompanied the first edition back in 1840. That Kindle version is the one I read.

Of course I have read many moving descriptions *by preachers* of guilt and regret and judgment. But I am not sure that I have ever read anything so powerful as the journey Dickens leads us on as we watch old Scrooge survey his life and all the misery he has either caused or failed to lift a finger to help. Such regret!

Scrooge is led into this regret by Marley's Ghost. Marley had been Scrooge's business partner. Now Marley is condemned to wander the world observing the suffering that folks endure, but no longer with any ability to help, for he is just a ghost.

Early on, Scrooge tries to cheer up Marley's Ghost. Scrooge has not yet understood Marley's point. Scrooge is still stuck in his hard-hearted ways. But he sees that Marley's Ghost is sorrowful and so he tries to cheer him up by reminding him that he had been a good businessman. The conversation begins with Marley grieving that in his earthy life, he just *did not know* how important charity is. His heart had been too hard, too much preoccupied with money, too indifferent to those around him. There was so much he *should have* known, only he had let his greed get in the way. The conversation, then, begins with Marley's lament. He feels shame not to have known:

Not to know that any Christian spirit working kindly in its little sphere, whatever it may be, will find its mortal life too short for its vast means of usefulness. Not to know that no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused! Yet such was I! Oh! such was I!"

"But you were always a good man of business, Jacob," faltered Scrooge, who now began to apply this to himself.

"Business!" cried the Ghost, wringing its hands again. "Mankind was my business. The common welfare was my business; charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were all my business. The dealings of my trade were but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business!"

So, the innkeeper in the Christmas story conducts his business in his practical way. Let us hope that he also tends to his true business: Mankind is his true business. Humanity is *our* true business.

MARTIN LUTHER

In a famous Christmas Eve sermon from around 1522, Martin Luther gently but firmly scolded the people of Wittenberg for what he considered their overconfidence that they would have rushed to help poor Mary and Joseph. He said this:

There are many who become inflamed with unreal devotion when they hear of such poverty of the Christ-child. They are almost filled with wrath against the citizens of Bethlehem; they condemn their blindness and ingratitude and are of the opinion, that had they been there, they would have rendered outstanding service to the Lord and his mother and they would not have stood for such miserable treatment. But they do not look around themselves to see how many of their immediate neighbors there are who could use their help and whom they are neglecting and leaving exactly as they are. Who is there on earth who is not surrounded by poor, miserable, ailing, erring, or sinful people? Why then does he not perform his deeds of love right here?¹

Well, on the one hand, I have sympathy for those housewives of Wittenberg. I want to defend the mothers of Wittenberg, for, it seems to me, that when they dream of being present with Mary to assist at the birth of Jesus, they are thinking of concrete matters of the sort they know. They are not thinking of the stuff of prophets and poets and apostles. They are thinking of a newborn baby. They know of the pain of childbirth. They know about teaching the little ones to talk, to walk, to try to grow up in favor with God and man. They know about the hope that parents have for their children. And they know about the dangers of this world -- of plagues and wars and criminals and of all those things that can steal a child away from you. They can imagine the plight of young Mary. They know what it means to bring a child into a world of which you are not the master, and for all you know, this little one for whom you've suffered pain and weariness will come to harm -- indeed, may even come to a cross. So, Christmas comes and the housewives of Wittenberg dream of Mary and the Babe. They reach out in imagination to their sister, Mary. They would help her if they could. They would like to lend a hand to taking care of the Christ child - - to that Babe of Bethlehem who would grow up to be their Savior and Lord. So, I sympathize with the impulse to help Mary, if only we could.²

On the other hand, Luther is right that you and I can render such help even now. My! We are drawing near to the stuff of sainthood here! For it is the

¹ From Luther's *Wartburg Postil*, which were meant to be model evangelical sermons, written by Luther during his exile in the Wartburg Castle, from 1521-22. LW 52

² I have taken much of this paragraph from my sermon for The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 12, 1996—quite a while ago now.

highest principle of the pious life that we should train ourselves to see Jesus everywhere, and then rush to his help.

That seems to have been the principle that Mother Teresa lived by, for example:

Mother Teresa sometimes held up the five fingers of one hand to explain this. The whole Gospel, she said, could be counted on five fingers: “You-did-it-to-me.”³

She is referring to the teaching of Jesus about ministry to the neglected ones of earth. Jesus has welcomed the compassionate into his kingdom and thanked them for their ministry to him. They are confused by this. They ask Jesus when did they minister to him. The beautiful dialogue goes this way:

³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? ³⁸And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? ³⁹And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?’ ⁴⁰And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.’ (Matthew 25:37-40, RSV)

You-did-it-to-me.

This was the principle Mother Teresa lived by, and in the process she touched many people. One dying man she picked up from the gutter put into words the gratitude he felt that he had encountered the love of God through Mother Teresa and her willingness to see Jesus everywhere:

I’ve lived like an animal in the street, but I’m going to die like an angel, loved and cared for!⁴

CHRISTMAS, THE COMMENCING OF COMPASSION

You and I have been privileged to see tender compassion over the course of our lives. I bet we have. Maybe we remember our mother tending our sick brother or sister, a wife or husband tending an ill spouse, a gentle and skilled

³ Fr. Leo Maasburg, *Mother Teresa of Calcutta*. Translated by Michael J. Miller (Ignatius Press: San Francisco. Original German edition, 2010), page 36.

⁴ <http://theinnerkingdom.wordpress.com/2010/12/07/let-us-love-one-another-by-mother-teresa/>

touch from a nurse toward someone suffering in the hospital, or ten thousand deeds of kindness that make for a good world.

Yes, we have seen compassion, but never have we seen it like this, when on that first Christmas Eve the only begotten Son of God was born in a stable and laid in a manger. Jesus surrendered the safety and glory of heaven and came to our earth to save us. His Christmas birth is the great commencing of his tender compassion toward our human race.

TWO CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

I conclude with two thoughts. The first is solemn; the second is happier.

First, the solemn one: Our land has been rocked by murder and mayhem, by horror and heartbreak. A couple Sundays ago here at Immanuel, the children of the congregation led us in beautiful celebration of Advent Lessons and Carols. As I watched and listened, I found myself thinking what I suspect many grown-ups were thinking: that those little ones in Newtown, Connecticut *should have* been enjoying life like that: singing and moving, smiling and hugging each other with joy. It should be that way for all God's children.

Our legislators and law enforcement people will do what they can to make our land a safer and happier one, and God bless them in their efforts. But I fear that the problem is not just legal, but also spiritual.

Psalm 33 says that the Lord sees the deeds of humanity:

¹³The LORD looketh from heaven; he beholdeth all the sons of men.... he considereth all their works. (Psalm 33:13-15, KJV)

Who is this LORD who looketh down from heaven and beholdeth deeds of humanity? It is the One we celebrate this evening. It is Jesus, born into a rough manger and headed toward a rugged cross because he loves all the little children of this earth enough to become one of them and to live and die for them. And woe to the one who hurts the little children!

Our land needs a spiritual renewal. Let it begin with you and with me. Let us so live from now on that we will fashion ourselves into building blocks of renewal of faith, in America and in the world—a faith that can never be content with injustice, never means to hurt the innocent, and means only peace and goodwill on earth.

And now, it is fun to end this Christmas Eve sermon with the final words of *A Christmas Carol*. You know how it goes with old Scrooge. He awakens. He awakes from his encounter with Marley's Ghost and from this wee hour travels to and fro. He repents, he mends his ways, and he cheerfully lives out the days

remaining to him with kindness toward others and true joy in the Christmas spirit. The final happy words of the story find him waking up in his own bed:

YES! and the bedpost was his own. The bed was his own, the room was his own. Best and happiest of all, the Time before him was his own, to make amends in!

...and it was always said of him, that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge. May that be truly said of us, and all of us! And so, as Tiny Tim observed, God Bless Us, Every One!⁵

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁵ Dickens, Charles (2011-11-22). *A Christmas Carol* (Illustrated) (Kindle Locations 1419-1421). Top Five Books. Kindle Edition.