



SUNDAY SERMON

Broken Hearts, Open Doors

The Gospel according to Luke, chapter 2, verses 15 to 21.

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

*Christmas time is here
Happiness and cheer
Fun for all, that children call
Their favorite time of year*

DATE

The Feast of the Holy Name
Sun., Jan. 1, 2017

PREACHER

The Rev. Jason Cox

READINGS

Numbers 6:22-27
Psalm 8
Galatians 4:4-7
Luke 2:15-21

Look, I know it's new year's out there, but in here it's just the eighth day of Christmas, so bear with me.

If you turn on your TV during the holidays—or you've ever done so, between 1966 and now—then you recognize those lines about Christmas as the theme song from the Charlie Brown Christmas Special. I remember as a kid making sure to check the TV listings the week before Christmas to find out what night and what time the show would be playing this year, since the Charlie Brown Christmas Special was as much a part of my family's Christmas traditions as stockings and Santa and too much food.

These days, nostalgia is at your fingertips—no need catch an annual broadcast. I missed it on TV this year, but I couldn't sleep a couple of nights ago, and in a fit of Christmas sentimentality I Googled "A Charlie Brown Christmas," and there it was on my laptop.

The story was pretty much how I remembered—the peanuts gang are putting on a Christmas play, but Charlie Brown is frustrated because the other kids don't seem to understand the real meaning of Christmas. When Charlie Brown goes off to buy a Christmas tree to help bring some Christmas spirit to the pageant, Lucy tells him, "Get a good one Charlie Brown. Something aluminum. And pink!"

Instead Charlie Brown returns with a sad looking little pine tree, the only real tree in the lot. This is a story about authenticity versus commercialism, sincerity versus glibness. Later, when Charlie Brown is at the end of his rope, and even he isn't sure anymore what Christmas is really about, Linus says to him, "I'll tell you what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown," and proceeds to quote Luke's version of the nativity narrative from the King James Version, with shepherds and angels and glad tidings of great joy.

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This part I remembered. What really surprised me, though, was the beginning of the show. The first half of the Charlie Brown Christmas Special is about how depressed Charlie Brown is because of the holidays. Charlie Brown says to Linus, "I think there must be something wrong with me ... Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I like decorating trees, and sending Christmas cards and all that. But it doesn't matter. I always end up feeling depressed."

Whoa, I thought. This is pretty heavy for a children's television special. I don't remember this from when I was a kid.

But . . . I can certainly relate, nowadays.

Maybe its just getting older. Each year that goes by, there's a possibility that Christmas will come around and someone that ought to be there—your grandma, or your mom and dad, or your brother, or your spouse—won't be there. Feelings of loss are exacerbated by all the "happiness and cheer" you're supposed to be feeling. You're supposed to be having a perfect holiday—so why aren't you? What's wrong with you?

Despite what our culture says, perfection and happiness are not the normal way of things. Left to ourselves, the human condition is more likely to be fraught with anxiety and fear, that can too often lead to violence or despair. So if you are feeling a little broken this Christmas, take heart—its only natural.

In fact, I would say that acknowledging our brokenness—acknowledging our feelings of anxiety and incompleteness—this brings us much closer to the heart of God than denying them. After all, how can God ever get in if we keep insisting, in our nice American sort of way, that, really, everything is fine. No, no, thanks, but everything is ok. I'm perfectly alright, thank you, on my own. But thanks!

Today we celebrate the Feast of the Holy Name. It's eight days past Christmas, the day when Mary and Joseph, being good Jewish parents, would have had the little boy circumcised. And when they did, they gave him the name that the angel Gabriel had instructed Mary to give: Jesus. The name means "God Saves" in Hebrew.

What is it—who is it—that we need saving from this year? God has come into the world to save us from our anxiety and our fear. But salvation doesn't stop there. It isn't just a personal matter. In place of this anxiety and fear, God offers love and healing. Love and healing which, if we let it, will create peace in our hearts—and, if we let it, peace in the world around us.

We need to be saved from the rulers of this world who mistake power for peace. In Jesus's day, that ruler was Caesar, the Roman emperor—lauded the world over for bringing peace to the nations, the Pax Romana; but at what price?

We enter Luke's story this morning just after the shepherds have been caught off guard by all those angels singing out in the fields, blinded by God's mid-day glory shining in the darkest part of the night. The good news the angels told them was this: the child that was born will be a savior who brings peace.

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

Savior—that was a title they also gave to Caesar, you know. The people who benefitted from Caesar's reign, the rich and the powerful—that's what they called him. Their savior. And he was also said to be the son of God. His father was supposed to be Apollos, the God of Light, and Caesar Augustus was the son who had brought light into the ancient world. He had won peace for Rome by brutally crushing her enemies. His was peace through domination. Peace through victory. Peace through power.

So for Luke to give those exact titles to Jesus instead—to call Jesus savior, Son of God, light of the world—was to insist that real peace was different from what Caesar had created. Real peace, God's peace, meant peace for everybody. And it started with the lowest, dirtiest shepherds, at the very bottom of the Empire's heap. Somehow, in Jesus, God's light was able to break through all the lies of domination and power, and teach us that love must reach the lowest and the least or it isn't peace at all.

And this is where our brokenness comes in. To quote a Leonard Cohen song, "there is a crack in everything: that's how the light gets in". If we are sealed up and complete in ourselves and closed off, then God's light cannot pierce us, and God's peace can never take root in our hearts.

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Think of all the brokenness it took for God to be born in the flesh two thousand years ago. Where would we be without an unmarried pregnant teenager, from a poor family, giving birth in a barn, a refugee far from home? This was a broken beginning, full of cracks, not at all the way you would plan it. But without this fragmented hope, how could Jesus ever have come into the world?

And if you were perfect, how could God ever get inside you? If you were everything you needed all in by yourself, how could God's light ever pierce you? Don't resist your brokenness. Let your sadness, your anxiety, your fear, be the door for God's love to come in, get inside you, and grow.

The world thinks you can get to peace through power. But God's way to peace is through love. Love opens doors, and love opens hearts. It starts with how we love this unwed refugee mother and her little boy sleeping in the animal's feeding trough. And it ends when that same love embraces every child of God—every refugee, every unwed mother, every scared child, every struggling, working-class laborer trying to support a family.

God's love is waiting to embrace all of them. But until they know it, until they feel it—all of the lost and the lonely and the broken—there will be no peace on earth. Let this love in, through every broken part of you—let it be born in your heart this morning, and let's work together to help it grow, and share it as widely as we can.

Amen.