

This Christmas you can find hope

Message for Sunday, December 22, 2019
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Luke 2:10-11

Children's Message: Luke 2:1-7, the birth of Jesus

Have you ever received one of these? It's an invitation to a birthday party. Have you ever had a birthday party, or been to a friend's birthday party? What kind of things did you do? *Listen as the children share their experiences.* Sounds like you had fun!

Let's try to imagine a different kind of birthday party. Let's say it's your birthday, and you have some friends over to join you. They sing "Happy Birthday" to you. But for the rest of the time, they play with each other, and give gifts to one another. They completely ignore you! How would that feel? *Probably not very good. Let them explore the idea.*

Sometimes Christmas is like that. It's Jesus' birthday, it's his birthday party. Yet when all the family and friends gather together to celebrate and share gifts, Jesus is often left out.

Idea: how can we give a gift to Jesus? *Listen to suggestions; some may be surprising.* Jesus says that when we help others, we are actually helping him. That would be one way we make a gift to Jesus: do something for someone else.

Thanks to Harvey and Patsie Moore for this idea, in their book *The Droopy Flower Mystery*.

Message: "This Christmas you can find hope"

One of the most beloved movies ever made by Jimmy Stewart is the Christmas movie *It's a Wonderful Life*. Near the beginning of the movie, an angel gets an assignment to go and help this guy who is in trouble. The angel in charge says, "You've got to go help this guy George Bailey." And Clarence the angel says, "What is it? Is he sick?" I love the answer he gets: "No, it's worse than that. He's discouraged."

I love that line, because discouragement—the lack of hope—can be worse than physical illness.

Hope is a wonderful gift from God. Wishing is just wistful thinking. Hope is having confidence that good is on its way. Here's an example.

A teacher was employed in the pediatric wing of a hospital, helping the children stay caught up with their school work. One day the name of a new patient was on her list. Also listed was the school the boy attended. The teacher phoned the school and talked with the boy's teacher. The other teacher said, "We're studying nouns and adverbs in his class now. I'd be grateful if you could help him with his homework so he doesn't fall behind the others."

It wasn't until she entered the boy's room that she realized it was located in the hospital's burn unit. Nothing had prepared her to find a young boy horribly burned and in great pain. She had no idea what to say. "How are you?" or "Good morning" seemed inappropriate. She awkwardly stammered, "I'm the hospital teacher, and your teacher at school sent me to help you with nouns and adverbs." She was so nervous, she went straight into the lesson without attempting to make any small talk.

The next morning when she returned to the boy's room, a nurse asked her, "What did you do to that boy?" She started to apologize for her behaviour the day before, but the nurse interrupted her: "You don't understand. We've been very worried about him, but ever since you were here yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He's fighting back, responding to treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

The boy later explained that he had completely given up hope until he saw that teacher. With joyful tears he expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

1) Christmas brings a message of hope

Well, God is a God of hope, and the message of Christmas is a message of hope. Listen to the message which the angel gave to the shepherds.

Luke 2:10-11, Today's English Version:

The angel said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all the people. This very day in David's town your Saviour was born—Christ the Lord!"

Good news! Christ is born! We commonly think of Christ as the second name for Jesus: *Jesus Christ*. It's really his title. The word "Christ" is Greek; in Hebrew it's "Messiah." Both words mean the same thing: this is the one anointed by God to save the people.

I don't think it's possible for us today to appreciate just how thrilling it was to hear this message. Six centuries earlier, the prophet Jeremiah had told of God's promise of a Saviour to restore the nation (Jeremiah 33:14-18). Six hundred years of waiting!!! And now the promise has been fulfilled! Like I said, we can't even begin to imagine the excitement, the hope, the joy, the laughter, the prayers and praise they offered to God.

Well, maybe we can, sort of. The reason I say we can't is because we weren't in that situation. But what if you were in a situation where things looked hopeless, where your mistakes were coming back to haunt you, where you wished with all your heart that you could live the last week or the last year over again. What if, into that situation, God came and said to you, "I just want you to know that I still believe in you. You may think it's the end of the world, but trust me: it's only the beginning. Or it can be, if you will trust me and follow me from now on. I forgive you for all your sins, and I love you, if you are willing. Will you accept me into your life?"

Anyone who has ever experienced God's grace and love can testify to the thrill of that message of hope. That's what Christmas brings: it brings the Saviour Jesus; it brings a message of hope, even for us today.

2) They hoped for great things; but saw even greater

Now we today have a totally different idea of what it means to be the Saviour, than the people of Israel did back then. To us, we think of Jesus coming to restore our relationship with God which was broken by sin, and to lead us into a new way of living which Jesus called "the kingdom of God." For the shepherds who heard the message, and for everyone else whom they told, it would mean only one thing: God is going to throw out the Romans, and restore our nation to its former glory. It's still a message of hope; it's just a totally different kind of hope.

I've never lived under a dictator or a foreign invader. Millions of people in our world, though, know all too well what this means. The methods which dictators use to keep control of a nation haven't changed at all in two thousand years: fear and ruthless brutality. The Roman empire wasn't much different from any modern dictator. Keep quiet and keep your nose clean, and you'll be fine. But start asking questions or stirring up trouble, and it's goodbye.

Among the Jewish people was a small group called Zealots. They were committed to the overthrow of the Roman invaders. They carried a dagger, and anytime there was an opportunity to kill a Roman official or soldier, they would not hesitate to do it. They even killed other Jews who were collaborating with the Romans.

Even though most of the people did not take things to the extreme that the Zealots did, the mood was the same among the people: get rid of the Romans. Surely the Saviour would free the people from this oppressor. They hoped for great things to come from Jesus. What they got was something completely different. Something far, far better.

You see, changing the government doesn't change people's hearts. Jesus came to bring real, lasting change in people. Not surface stuff. Not the fluff that our celebrity culture dwells on. But deep inner change.

Here's an example of what I mean. When the Gospels list the names of Jesus' disciples (see Matthew 10:2-4), we see that one of them was Matthew the tax collector—someone who collected taxes for the Romans, making him one of the most despised and hated people in the country. One of the other disciples was Simon the Zealot (this is not Simon Peter; there were two Simons in the group). He was one of those Zealots, a sworn enemy of people like tax collectors. The fact that these two became like brothers under Jesus is a miracle. It is evidence of the power of the love and grace which fills our hearts and souls when we give them to Jesus.

When we surrender our lives to Jesus and follow him, his power at work within us can heal broken

hearts, restore marriages and families, and even turn hatred into fellowship.

Author and speaker Tony Campolo tells this story:

I was in a church in Oregon not too long ago, and I prayed for a man who had cancer. In the middle of the week, I got a telephone call from his wife. She said, "You prayed for my husband. He had cancer." I said, "Had?" Whoa, I thought, it's happened – a miracle!

She said, "He died." I felt terrible.

She continued, "Don't feel bad. When he came into that church that Sunday he was filled with anger. He knew he was going to be dead in a short period of time, and he hated God. He was 58 years old, and he wanted to see his children and grandchildren grow up. He was angry that this all-powerful God didn't take away his sickness and heal him. He would lie in bed and curse God. The more his anger grew towards God, the more miserable he was to everybody around him. It was an awful thing to be in his presence. After you prayed for him, a peace had come over him and a joy had come into him. Tony, the last three days have been the best days of our lives. We've sung. We've laughed. We've read Scripture. We prayed. Oh, they've been wonderful days. And I called to thank you for laying your hands on him and praying for healing.

And then she said something incredibly profound. She said, "He wasn't cured, but he was healed."

Jesus still comes today. And wherever he comes, he brings a message of hope.

Next Steps:

- Have you messed up in life? Don't despair. Put your hope in God, who specializes in giving new life!
- Pray: Ask God to forgive your past, walk with you in the present, and lead you to a new future.