

How Silently, How Silently, The Wondrous Gift is Given

Scripture: Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 2:6-7

Tw'as the night before Christmas and all through the house, not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse. Well, that might be true in some places, but for most of us the Christmas season has been anything but quiet. When you think about it, this time of year can make a lot of noise. There is the noise of music playing, Christmas parties and family gatherings. Some of the sounds of Christmas are joyous sounds: like bells ringing, choirs singing, happy children playing. Of course, some of the sounds are not so pleasant: horns beeping, an angry customer yelling, parents stressed out and speaking sharply and loudly to their children. Yes, this season can be a noisy and stressful time of year.

I suppose that Bethlehem was a pretty noisy place with crowds of people scurrying about, all those who had responded to Caesar Augustus' call for a census. Things were so busy in the city of David that there was no room in an inn for an expectant mother, by the name of Mary. Even that first Christmas appeared to be a time with a lot of noise.

But was it for everybody. If we could look beyond the crowds of people, the busy marketplace, the hustle and bustle of the town, the true Christmas story was being revealed in a very humble place, in a quiet stable or cave. Maybe a few moos of cows and baas of sheep, but there lying in a manger bed is the very Prince of Peace, the Savior of the world.

What a strange place for such an important event. Why not have the Savior born in a palace and announced royally with trumpet sound. Why here in such a lowly place? In such a quiet place. "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given."

And how easy it might be to miss the significance of the glorious birth, this event of eternal importance. But you know, noise, crowds, busy-ness can stifle our ability to see and hear. The noise of this world can hinder our receptivity to spiritual truth.

I heard about a woman who was doing her last-minute Christmas shopping with her 2 daughters. The crowds were awful, they had to skip lunch because she was on such a tight schedule, trying to get everything done. Now she was tired, hungry, her feet were hurting and she was feeling quite stressed out. As she left the last store, she noticed that her one little girl was missing. Looking around, she finally

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spotted her. She was standing in front of a store front that had a beautiful display of the nativity. The girl was fascinated by the little baby in the manger. Quickly the mother grabbed her child and said: "We don't have time for this, I'm trying to get ready for Christmas!"

I guess before we feel judgmental of her actions, we know we've all been there. We allow the hectic pace and the cultural expectations of the season to quench the Christmas spirit. We've talked about that at our staff meeting. All the things to do to get ready for Christmas. All the events, the activities, the services, and we have to remind ourselves to stay focused on what it's all about, the spiritual message before us.

So I wonder if in this busy time of year, we can shut out the noise...How about it in this last week before Christmas. To hear and pay attention to the reason for the season. Because our listening to the voice of the Spirit can be pretty poor. How blessed are those quiet moments in our lives when we can be still know our God. Maybe we need to hear that promise again that Pastor Hey Young shared 2 weeks ago from Isaiah: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength" Wait upon the Lord.

Is there some spiritual truth, some word of guidance the Lord may have in store for you? I think a lot has to do with us paying attention to it. If we would humbly be open to it and receive it.

Just think about those who received the message of the Christmas event. They were often seen as humble characters. A righteous Zachariah, a poor maiden Mary, humble shepherds. These are the ones who became the recipients of God's good news. And even the wise men, who were of prominent and royal position were diligent seekers of spiritual truth and fall down and worship the Christ-child.

Soon Christmas day will be upon us, and then the celebration will soon be over, the gifts unwrapped, a lot of food and drink consumed. And then we put things away until next year. And we can go back to our routines and never have allowed the real message of this season effect us. Or we can be intentional about listening, taking time to be silent, focusing upon what Christmas means to you personally, spiritually.

Gordon McDonald in his book, Ordering Your Private World, discusses the neglect to what he calls the development of the inner life. He says our private worlds are often in a state of disorderliness or weakness. We are constantly giving attention to the establishing of life on a surface level, the visible level, what the public sees. He says: "Our

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outer world is much more measurable, visible, and expandable. Our outer world consists of work, play, possessions, and a host of acquaintances that make up our social network. It's that part of our existence that is easiest to evaluate in terms of success, popularity, wealth, and beauty." But he goes on to talk about our inner nature. Our inner world that is more spiritual in nature. Here is the center in which choices and values are determined, Here is where solitude and reflection might be pursued. When it comes to the outer world, most of us have learned to manage that fairly well. We have learned how to take orders, make schedules, give directions. And this outer world is filled with a seeming infinity of demands on our time, our loyalties, our money and our energies. And what happens is that our private world, this inner nature is often cheated, it is neglected because it does not shout quite so loudly. And so what one may exhibit or look like on the outside can be quite different from one's inward condition.

In a book of Advent readings, the writer speaks of the pianist Arthur Schnabel who was asked the secret of his musical genius. He replied: "I don't think I handle the notes much differently than other pianists, but the pauses between the notes, ah, there is where the artistry lies."

We have been created with a need for those pauses. Those places of solitude, those places of quiet reflection. That explains why we need the Sabbath rest, a day of rest each week in order to re-charge and find a more balanced rhythm of life. I like how one writer put it: "No matter how important the work I am doing, it is not so important that I cannot stop and do nothing except praise God and live in the wonder of this world that God gives us."

We come to worship on this Sunday before Christmas to gather in wonder of God's wonderful gift of love. On this 4th Sunday in Advent we light the candle of love and proclaim...love came down at Christmas. We want to experience that kind of love.

One young mother had worked hard at trying to make her Christmas a calm and peaceful experience. She had cut back on the nonessential obligations, the endless baking, all the decorating and even the overspending. Yet she said: I still found myself exhausted, unable to appreciate the precious family moments and the true meaning of Christmas. Her son, Nicholas was in kindergarten and he had been memorizing songs for his school's "Winter Pageant." She goes on to tell her story: "I had to work the night of the production, but the teacher assured me that there'd be a dress rehearsal and all parents

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unable to attend that evening were welcome to come then. So the morning of the rehearsal, I filed in ten minutes early and found a spot on the cafeteria floor. As I waited the students were led into the room. Because the public school system had long stopped referring to the holiday as “Christmas” I didn’t expect anything other than fun, commercial songs of reindeer, Santa Claus, snowflakes and good cheer. So when by son’s class rose to sing, “Christmas Love”, I was slightly taken aback by its bold title.

The children in the front row held up large letters, one by one to spell out the title of the song. As the class would sing “C is for Christmas”, a child would hold up the letter C. Then “H is for Happy” and on and on, until each child holding up his or her portion had presented the complete message Christmas Love. Everything was going smoothly, until suddenly, we noticed her; a small, quiet girl in the front row holding the letter “M” upside down – totally unaware her letter “M” appeared as a “W”. The audience of 1st through 6th graders snickered at this little one’s mistake. But she had no idea they were laughing at her, so she stood tall, proudly holding her “W”.

Well, the teachers tried to quiet the children, but the laughter continued until the last letter was raised, and we all saw it together. In that instant, we understood the reason we were there, why we celebrated the holiday in the first place, why even in the chaos, there was a purpose for our festivities. For when the last letter was held high, the message read loud and clear: “CHRISTWASLOVE”.

For you and me, as we draw nearer to Christmas day, let’s not miss the main message: The message of God’s love for us. The message of God’s gift of salvation. The message that God so loved the world that God gave us the gift of Jesus.

I invite you to allow the truth of what this season is all about speak to you, touch your life, and make a difference in how you go about your everyday life? “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given... No ear may hear his coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.”