

CROSSING THE DIVIDE

Christmas Eve 2021 | Text: Philippians 2:1-8

Bells & Piano: Angels We Have Heard on High

Christian author, Gordon MacDonald, is no "Angel from On High" but he does tell a story that helps make clear why we especially need the message of Christmas this year. After speaking at a conference, MacDonald was approached by an impressive Nigerian woman, who turned out to be a doctor at one of America's great teaching hospitals. She introduced herself using an American name and Gordon asked, *"What's your African name?"* She smiled and uttered a word several syllables long that had an almost musical sound to it. *"What does the name mean?"* MacDonald inquired. ***"It means, 'Child who takes the anger away.'"***

The woman then went on to describe how her mom and dad had been forbidden by their parents to marry because they were from two different tribes. When they went forward and wed anyway, they were rejected and shunned by both families for several years. *"Then my mother became pregnant with me,"* the beautiful doctor said. *"And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down."* They gave me this name for *"I was the one who swept the anger away."*¹

Do you suppose that's possible? Could the birth of one baby somehow unleash a power that pacifies passions and heals broken relationships? Could there really be a child who takes the anger away? I wonder...

Solo: I Wonder as I Wander

There's a lot of ANGER in our world today. Have you noticed that? I thought we'd hit the peak of it last year, but the hostility keeps climbing. We're battling over the person in the White House, the legislation coming out of Congress, the rulings from our Court Houses. We're fighting over masks and borders and teaching in schools. We're seeing more looting in our stores and shooting in our streets. So many rules and relationships in our society are broken. People feel they're 100% right and others are 100% wrong. Mistrust and mania is the climate of our times. Our news sources have become little more than ranting, raving echo chambers. Even within our families, sometimes, there are hard hearts and bitter feelings and divided houses.

I'm not trying to minimize the complexity of all this. There are legitimate issues and important differences in all of these places. There ARE truths to be talked about and changes that need to happen. But how are we even going to approach one another or make the sacrifices and compromises needed to fix what's wrong when life is at this stubborn, prideful, fever pitch? It's almost like we need a very pure and very powerful child who takes the anger away...

Anthem: The First Noel

It's really hard to take in what happened at that First Noel. We sentimentalize it. We trivialize it. We struggle to get our heads around it. And for good reason. What God did at Christmas is so big... It's so counter to the way things usually work... that everybody who was THERE – from the mighty angel warriors in the sky, to the blue-collar shepherds in the field, to the sophisticated wisemen from the east, to the cynical King Herod on his throne, to the humble peasant Joseph watching as a baby's head crowned with blood – all of them were completely stunned by it. As we should be.

The brilliant legal scholar, Paul of Tarsus, was convinced that if we truly GOT what happened at Christmas, it would convert us completely. It would re-orient all of our interactions with other people – and especially all those wrong people with whom we are angry. So Paul writes THIS Christmas card of sorts to some people living in the prosperous city of Philippi – hoping that it will have a transforming effect on them.

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus... (Phil 2:5). Now, you need to know the backstory here. The people Paul is writing to in Philippi are fighting with each other a lot. We know from the four verses leading up to this verse that there was a lot of pride and very little **humility** in that society. A spirit of **ambition** and **vain conceit** had infected that community. Paul implies that **tenderness** and **compassion** were hard to find. People were looking mainly to their **own interests** instead of the needs of other people. They did not **value** those who were not like them. They were pretty sure they had the right **mindset** and others were stupid or evil. Philippi was a society divided in **mind** and **spirit** (Phil 2:1-4).

But if we remember Jesus, Paul says... If we can take on the **same mindset as Christ Jesus** has... things can radically change for the better. And so, Paul goes on to talk about what truly happened at Christmas AND at Easter – because these events are connected. I want to reflect on that with you in just a moment, because it is something so stunning that I'm not sure that on that first night even Mary knew...

Solo: Mary Did You Know?

It's hard for anyone to fully grasp, as St. Paul says, that the Being we meet in the manger -- **[Jesus] was in very nature God... (Phil 2:6)**. He lived in a timeless dimension of absolute beauty, joy, and peace. He was rapturously loved and worshipped constantly by dazzling angels. He was the source and center of ultimate reality. To be HIM in that place was an ecstasy so spectacular that for you or me to experience it even for a nanosecond would blow all our neural circuits.

Yet he did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage... (Phil 2:6). All of this glory and comfort was his entirely by right. It would have been to his advantage to stay where he was forever, to care not a whit for

conditions on a little dust mote called Earth whose inhabitants were stupidly and selfishly wasting the resources they'd been given and fighting each other madly. But preserving his power, position, and privilege was not Christ's priority. HIS mindset was: How can I lift OTHERS up? How can I use who I am to give others more ADVANTAGE?

[So], he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness... (Phil 2:7) The Son of God squeezed himself down the chimney between eternity and time and emerged soot-soaked in a stable to share the life of the human family. As he grew up, he experienced all the stresses and challenges you and I do and displayed what it looks like to meet them with courage and grace. Jesus met human pain with compassion and human foolishness with patience. He taught people that successful relationships depend less on being "right" than with being humble, generous, kind and forgiving. Jesus did good even to his enemies.

And being found in appearance as a man, he stooped even further to meet humanity's greatest need. Our deepest problem as human beings is that we have been separated from God by sin and can't bridge that divide on the strength of our own goodness. So Jesus voluntarily laid down his life to pay off the debt we couldn't cover... **he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:8).** And in his dying, Christ not only opened up the way for you and me to a restored relationship with God, he showed us the kind of self-giving, self-sacrificing LOVE for imperfect people that is so needed for this world to be redeemed.

If you truly understand Christmas and the Cross, you find that the Christ is the Child who takes away your ANGER toward other people and fills you with a love like HIS for them. If you truly understand the vast distance that Christ crossed, you find the courage to cross the political, social, racial and personal divides that separate people these days. Christ makes you want to be reconciled with others and work to build a better future. In short, HE inspires us with a passion to be more faithful...

Anthem: O Come, All Ye Faithful

My friend, John Ortberg, tells of a priest named Father Damien who crossed another divide that people don't typically cross. Damien moved to Kalawao -- a village on the Hawaiian island of Molokai that had been quarantined as a leper colony. For nearly 20 years, Damien represented "God with skin on" in their midst. He learned their language. He bandaged up their wounds. He embraced bodies others never touched and shared Christ's love with hearts others had left alone. Damien organized bands, choirs and schools. He built homes for his leper neighbors and crafted 2,000 coffins by hand so that, when they died, they could be buried with dignity. Slowly, Kalawao became a place to live rather than a place to die. Father Damien was a witness to God's hope.

As Ortberg writes: "Father Damien was not careful about keeping his distance... He dipped his fingers in the *poi* bowl along with the patients. He shared his pipe. He did not always [remember to] wash his hands after bandaging open sores. He got close. For this, the people loved him. Then one day [Damien] stood up and began his sermon

with two words: **'We lepers...'** Now he wasn't just helping them; he was one of them. He wasn't just on their island; he was in their skin. First, he had chosen to live as they lived; now he would die as they died. They were in it together."² Like the love between this parent and his child...

Solo: Joseph's Lullaby

The message of Christmas is that God didn't just come to help us long ago. He crossed the great divide to be one of us... to share our skin... to be "in it together" with us, FOREVER. **Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there I am with you" (Mat 8:20)** said Jesus. As there are certainly more than a few of us here tonight, we can confidently count on Jesus being here with us. The big question, I suppose, is how his being here will shape how we go forward to live beyond Christmas.

The angry, anxious world out there needs more Father Damien's – people who love with the courage and compassion that Jesus does. So, what is one divide you can boldly cross in the days ahead? What is one broken relationship you could seek to heal? How can you be one of those rare, radiant people whose steady character helps LIFTs people up in a world too bent on tearing people down?

As Paul says in his Christmas card to the Philippians: **¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, ² then make [HIS] joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind. ³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Phil 2:1-4)**

Because if you and I do these things, we will be living in the name of the Child King who came not to shout and stomp people into submission – *but to take the anger away...*

Anthem: Away in a Manger

In her reflection on the Christmas Story, Janet Oke wrote this: *"Jesus -- a simple name with so much power and meaning" – a proclamation that God is our savior. "But on that night so long ago, the tiny baby, wrapped by Mary in swaddling clothes, waving little arms, hungrily sucking a fist, was like any other newborn. He was helpless and dependent, and Mary was His hope of survival, His nourishment, His very lifeline. God entrusted His most priceless gift to a very human, very young, earthly mother. Why? Because God so loved -- that He GAVE. He relinquished His hold on His Son and placed Him in fragile human arms."*³

[# Offering Instruction KEY]What has God has placed in your fragile arms? I think of what he's given to ME – freedoms, opportunities, supportive mentors, material

blessings far beyond what most people in history have ever known. For this reason, it feels less like a sacrifice and more like a privilege to imitate the One who GAVE.

However, you and I choose to give tonight, we can know that our offering will help this church and our 75 partners around Chicagoland and the world to relieve suffering, lift women and children, transform communities, build up more disciples of Jesus, and develop the kind of leaders so needed in our time.

As the ushers come forward to receive our Christmas Offering, let's ponder again the grace of God that meets us on this Holy Night...

Offertory Solo: O Holy Night

Holy and gracious God, we bow indeed before the glory of who you are, the wonder of the distance you crossed, and the mystery of the depths that you went to – to enter into human skin... to be in this life with us... and to gain for us the gift of life abundant and eternal.

Tonight, some of us truly need to feel your loving presence with us – as we mourn or miss someone we love... as we go through a difficult transition... as we struggle with a job or relationships that are particularly hard. Some of us, God, especially need your guidance... or your provision. Some of us need your forgiveness or mercy in light of what we know we've done or left undone. Where any of us is lonely and in need of companionship, help him or her into the life and love of your church.

Then please protect those who stand in harm's way tonight and restrain the hand of violence. Shepherd our loved ones wherever they are. Draw those we find hard to love closer to yourself. And help us to treat even our enemies with the grace you have shown us.

Use all of us your followers to bring down the level of anger in this world and to lift up the level of hope. For we pray all of this in the name of the Child who is the Prince of Peace. Amen.

Hymn: Silent Night, Holy Night

Benediction

Organ Postlude: Joy to the World!

¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership Weekly* (11-6-02).

² John Ortberg, *God Is Closer Than You Think* (Zondervan, 2005), p. 103-104.

³ Janet Oke, "Reflections on the Christmas Story," *Christianity Today*, Vol. 39, no. 14.