

Solstice Enlightenment

There is a story about the young boy who was given a very important role in the church Christmas play. He was to be the angel and announce the birth of Jesus. For weeks he rehearsed the line that had been given to him, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy."

The grandparents got in on it and any time the family was together and the boy was there, they would dress him up in his costume and he would rehearse his part for them, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." They were certain that when he grew up, he would be another Charlton Heston playing Moses parting the Red Sea.

The great night came for the Christmas pageant and everybody was in place. All the grandparents and extended family were there. Visitors had come in and all the children were in costumes, complete with bathrobes for the three kings and gauze wings and tinsel halos for the angels. Everyone was excited.

As the pageant started, the anticipation was electric around the room. The dramatic event in the first act was the announcement by the angel, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." The spotlight hit this young boy and as he stood

center stage in the middle of all this excitement, his brain froze. Every grandparent, aunt, uncle and neighbor leaned toward the edge of their seats, wanting to say it for him. You could see them in unison, mouthing, "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy."

Still, his brain was frozen; he couldn't say it. He tried it, but it just wouldn't come. So, finally, in a heroic moment he filled his lungs with breath and blurted out the words, "Have I got news for you!"

This is probably what most of us need to hear when we find ourselves in the Winter Solstice longest night times of our lives. Individually and globally, we need good news! I think of that snappy song, "We need a little Christmas, right this very minute." For if there is any time we can push back the sorrow of this world, if there is any time that we can express goodwill toward others, if there is any time we can pierce through the evening news and get a glimpse of hope, it is at Christmastime.

As in the story that Traci read, there are some folks who object to the \$42 billion Christmas machine that rolls through our world each year. We are discouraged about it and the off-focus set of values foisted upon our children. Even in our current economy there are still excesses in Christmas. But, push away all

the excesses, push away all the tinsel, get rid of all the things that are absolutely unabashed materialism, come down to the core of it, and the message of Christmas is something the world really needs to hear. We need more than a little Christmas right now; we need a lot of Christmas right now. We also need a lot of Solstice right now, if I may say it that way.

The festival of Christmas, you know, originated as something the Christians coopted in the 4th century from the week-long Roman pagan Saturnalia celebration. In the middle of that week is the Winter Solstice on December 21. The celebration at the Solstice is, in part, a celebration that the darkness will be overcome by the light. On December 22 we begin our literal journey back to more daylight hours. The Solstice is a reminder of the promise inherent in the seasons that Light will always return to us – literally and figuratively – when we need it the most. As I see it, that message is the same as Christmas. Even in the midst of the darkest time, the most hopeless of circumstances, the deepest of personal depression – even in the midst of all that despair, the promise of Light, the returning Light, the newborn Light will come.

Have you noticed however, that we usually get just enough light to see the

next steps in front of us. We don't get to see the whole distance, the entire pathway, or the full future. And that's a blessing! We get just enough light to see what we need and to see where we are to go next. In the Christmas story, when the angel promised Mary that she would be favored of God it was good news. Yet her baby of Nazareth would grow into a man sent into a dangerous world. The powerful people would regard him with hatred. One day her sweet baby would be taken by the priests and rulers of his own nation, accused before a Roman governor, led to a hilltop amongst a jeering crowd, and there to die hanging on a cross. That was the future which Mary could not see and it was a gift that she couldn't. Mary's job – and ours – is to accept what we know at any given moment, fully engage with it, find the joy, and move forward in faith. Peace and joy are not dependent on unchallenged circumstances.

Two artists were commissioned to paint their conception of peace. A panel of distinguished judges would determine which artist had best captured the idea. The winner would get a rich commission. And after they had been painting for a long time, the judges assembled to view their work.

The first artist unveiled his painting, and there was a beautiful, magnificent

pastoral scene, with a farmer coming in after a hard day in the fields. His wife was cooking, his children were playing around the hearth, and all was at peace in this tranquil and beautiful farm.

"That's it," said the judges, "but we'll look at the other rendering anyway." They removed the veil of the second painting. Instead of a tranquil, pastoral scene, there was a raging waterfall producing a mist which communicated hostility. But over on the side of the waterfall was a tiny branch of a tree growing out of a rock, and on the end of the branch was a bird's nest. And on the edge of the nest was a mother bird, singing her heart out in the midst of the turbulence around her. The judges thought for a moment, then said, "This is peace, tranquility and celebration in the midst of turmoil."

We need a little Christmas right this very minute, but the Christmas that we need is hope and the courage and strength to engage in our world as it is. I think the faith community has done its best work when it has gone against the wind; when it has stood up to racism and war and inequality and poverty and genocide and suffering. This is when the faithful shine the brightest and bring more Light into the world. That's when we bring the good news to our community.

Faith communities of all kinds have also been victimized by unprepared preachers, tone-deaf musicians, manipulative members, argumentative Committee chairs, demanding denominations, unloving reformers, greedy politicians, and yet - yet Light and Love that some call God continue to prevail.

Our world desperately needs to know that not only will Light come tomorrow on December 22, in the teachings of Jesus the Christ, or the courage of Martin Luther King, Jr., or the wisdom the Buddha, and the faithful service of Mother Theresa, but that Light and Hope dawns forever in unexpected and often ordinary ways.

The 1957 motion picture "The Bridge Over the River Kwai" was selected as one of the 100 great films of the 20th century. It is the story of some British prisoners of war during World War II. They were held by the Japanese in northern Burma in a very difficult circumstance. It was made into a motion picture and won an Academy Award. Most of us know of it from that standpoint.

But Ernest Gordon, theologian and preacher, later to become chaplain at Yale, wrote a book called Through the River of the Kwai, which told another side - **his side** – of the story of degradation and desolation experienced by those

impoverished prisoners. His book tells how those in the camp interacted with one another. When the young soldiers realized that they were going to be there for a while, they began to have Bible studies and prayed diligently that they could be delivered from their present circumstances.

He said, "We knew that the thrust of our praying was to be delivered from this prison camp and that was it. Our praying was shallow and superficial, and we were railing against God for letting us be here. But something happened to us and that kind of railing against God disappeared. And we began to move toward a more mature faith. We began to pray about how we could relate to one another in those bad situations. No longer was it Why, God? but it was How should we act, God?"

Gordon said the most spiritual moment of his life was Christmas 1944. Out of deference to the men in the camp, they were not given work detail that day and were given a bit more food. He said that as they moved around the prison yard, they sensed that things were different. In one of the barracks (basically a thatched hut with a dirt floor and open sides where the men slept), one soldier began to sing a Christmas carol. It was echoed over the infirmary where men were dying. Then all around the camp, the men began to sing, and those who could, those who were

ambulatory, came to the parade field and sat there in a great circle. Gordon said, "God touched us that day."

Gordon said it was the most sacred event that he had ever been involved with. No preaching, nothing of the usual church paraphernalia, just men united by their common misery, singing of God being with them and God's sovereignty. And he said, "We were touched by God." Christmas became real to him when he was touched by God in the surprising place of a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp in northern Burma.

The world desperately needs this news. The Solstice Light, the Christmas hope is courage in the face of crisis, and Peace is the ability to focus in the face of confusion. No matter who you are, or where you are on your life's journey this morning I pray that you will experience Solstice enlightenment and the presence and peace of Christmas in the midst of whatever you're facing. If you don't know the peace of which I speak, then as the little boy said, "Have I got news for you!"