

Sunday December 18th, 2022

Advent IV

Colossians 2:8-15

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen

"Grandpa walked into the family room and found his little grandson, Jeffy, standing up in his playpen, crying. He looked so pitiful, standing there in his little baseball T-shirt and diaper. His face was red and tear-stained from crying. When Jeffy saw his grandpa, his face lit up in a way that smote the old man's heart. He immediately reached up his chubby little hands in supplication. "Out Papa, out!"

What grandpa could resist such a plea? Not this one! He walked over to the playpen and reached down to lift his little buddy out of captivity and distress. Just then, however, Law and Order stepped into the room. Jeffy's mother walked out of the kitchen with a dishtowel in her hand and spoke sternly. "No, Jeffy! You are being punished. You have to stay in bed! Leave him right there, Dad."

Oh, fine. Now what's a grandpa to do? His grandson's tears and reaching little hands tugged mightily at his heart- but he didn't want to interfere with a mother's discipline either. He couldn't stand staying in the same room with the boy, reading his newspaper and pretending to be aloof. Nor could he turn around and walk out the door without feeling like a betrayer to his little pal. What could he do?

Love found a way. Since Grandpa couldn't take Jeffy out of the playpen, he climbed in with him. "If you're in the playpen, Buddy, I'm in the playpen. What's your sentence? How long are you in for?" And finding a big, jolly grandpa suddenly filling his little prison cell, the little boy found comfort even in his captivity." Comfort in captivity. I think this is an apt description of the Christmas carol before us today.

"God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen" is one of the most famous and most theologically rich Christmas carols in existence. For 500 years, these classic lyrics and catchy tune of this song, have enthralled Christmas celebrants. I am well aware that it has fallen out of favour of late due to its seeming lack of inclusiveness. Some have tried to get around it by singing, "God Rest Ye Merry gentle-people". Seems awkward, doesn't it?

Here are the lyrics:

*God rest ye merry, gentlemen
Let nothing you dismay
Remember, Christ, our Saviour
Was born on Christmas day
To save us all from Satan's power
When we were gone astray
O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy*

*In Bethlehem, in Israel
This blessed Babe was born*

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*And laid within a manger
Upon this blessed morn
The which His Mother Mary
Did nothing take in scorn
O tidings of comfort and joy
Comfort and joy
O tidings of comfort and joy*

Now, I wish I could tell you there is a grand back story to this well-known carol, but I cannot. Scholars have yet to determine where this song actually came from, although it is clearly an English carol. Of all the carols still being sung today, this is actually, one of the oldest—dating back to before the 16th century. Charles Dickens even mentions the song in his classic 1843 story, *A Christmas Carol*.

The theme of the carol is somewhat challenging to modern sensibilities. We're told in the first verse that Christ was born on Christmas Day to save us all from Satan's power. That's a potent theological thought for churches to consider during this season. Despite our misgivings though, the carol does have a biblical support for its ideas. The Bible says it like this: "*The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil*" (1 John 3:8b).

All throughout the New Testament, we read about Jesus wrecking the devil's works. Every time he resisted temptation, healed an illness, or cast a demon out of a person. Generally, Jesus made a mockery out of the devil's plan. Of course, the ultimate example of this came at the cross, where he devastated the devil's plans, and destined him for destruction in a powerful display of triumph.

"And you, who were dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made alive together with him, having forgiven us all our trespasses, by canceling the record of debt that stood against us with its legal demands. This he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him" (Colossians 2:13–15).

The problem with this wonderful gift of God through Jesus, is that as free from the darkness around us we are, many of us remain unaware that we are free.

President Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation on September 22, 1862. The moment it went into effect on January 1, 1863, every slave living in the Confederacy was legally free. But until they knew of their freedom, the legal fact had no impact on their lives. In fact, Union soldiers carried hundreds of thousands of copies of the proclamation and passed them out as they made their way through the South during the war.

God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen is a reminder, and a declaration, of our emancipation. The carol tells us to remember. Remember our freedom and the heavy cost to obtain that freedom. We cherish the nativity story, but we must never forget where the story led. The story of Christmas does not end on December 25th. Instead, it leads ultimately to Calvary. And that is the point of this old Christmas carol.

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Christ has set us free from power of sin. We must recognize that fact and live like it.

C. S. Lewis is probably best known today as the author of The Chronicles of Narnia because that series of children's books have been made into movies. Lewis wrote many other books, including one entitled, Mere Christianity. In that book he tries to explain and "defend the belief that has been common to nearly all Christians at all times." He writes, "The central Christian belief is that Christ's death (and His coming to life again) has somehow put us right with God and given us a fresh start."

"We believe that the death of Christ is just the point in history at which something absolutely unimaginable from outside shows through into our own world. ... You may ask what good will it be to us if we do not understand it. But that is easily answered. A man can eat his dinner without understanding exactly how food nourishes him. A man can accept what Christ has done without knowing how it works.... His death has washed out our sins, and ... in dying He disabled death itself. That is ... Christianity." (C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, Collier Books, © 1952)

Christ's work of salvation is cause for rejoicing, no matter who we are. The carol though is calling us to remain focused on what the gift of Jesus accomplished. Freedom! The challenge that the carol pints at it that though we are already free we live like we are not free or we prefer the enslavement of the dark things of our lives. Do we really believe we are free? Our reluctance to believe we are free is why we gravitate to a "works theology".

Meaning we think we have to earn our way to deliverance. If only I did the right thing, sacrificed enough, or said the right things than I can earn my freedom. But its ridiculous when you think about it. How do you earn something you already have? Imagine driving into the local car dealership with your own car, fully paid for and offering to buy it. Who does that? Yet, we continue to think we have to earn God's favour.

Where's the comfort and joy in that? We have an awful time grasping the full significance of grace. When we question the nature of a gift, we insult the giver. By refusing to accept the gift, in some ways we are refusing to accept the giver. We cast suspicion on the giver. What do they want? What are they trying to earn from me? Sometimes we are embarrassed by a gift, because we have nothing to offer in return, so our minds immediately try to think of a way to pay the generosity back.

Then there is the worst thing of all to say to someone who gives you a gift. "Oh, you shouldn't have!" When we refuse to live like we are free in Christ, it is kind of like saying, "Oh, you shouldn't have!" Is this the message we want God to receive from our lives, from our hearts? Is this what we think of the nativity gift and its ultimate ending at Calvary? Are we with our lives saying to God, "Oh, you shouldn't have!"

You know, the bible is full of wonderful images of grace in action. One that really captures my heart is found in 2 Samuel 2. There we read of a scene transpiring in the palace of King David. Gold and bronze sculptures gleam from around the room. Lofty, high ceilings crown each spacious room of the palace. In the banquet room, David and his children gather for their evening meal. Absalom, tanned and handsome, is there, as is Tamar his beautiful daughter.

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The call to dinner has sounded, and the king scans the room to make sure everyone is there. One figure however is absent. Then everyone hears the sound. *Clum, scape, clump, scrape.* The sound is coming from one of the hallways that leads to the dinner room. The sound echoes throughout the room as everyone waits. Finally, a person appears at the door, and slowly shuffles to his seat. It is Mephibosheth, who was crippled as baby, while his nanny fled the palace after Johnathan his father died.

David wanted to honour his beloved friend, by showing grace to the sole survivor of Saul and Johnathan's line. It is only when his whole family, including Mephibosheth, finally is seated that the feast can begin. Julie Martin while reflecting on this beautiful story composed a very enlighten poem, entitled "Gace in a Barren Place." She writes:

"I was that Mephibosheth -Crippled by my twisted pride, and hiding from you in a barren place where you could not find me, where you could not give me what I deserved. But somehow You found me and I don't understand why but you give me what I do not deserve. You not only spared my desolate life but you made it bountiful and here at your table I will thank You, my King."

We are all Mephibosheth. We are all crippled by our pride, unwilling to humble ourselves and simply receive the grace offered to us. And humility is key. Have you ever noticed that when your hands are full, you cannot receive anything, let alone a gift. To receive a gift, any gift, we must first let go of our burdens to embrace what is being offered. So, lets just let it go. Let go of the hurts, the shame, the brokenness of our lives and let us receive grace.

In his book *In the Grip of Grace*, Max Lucado writes, "In my first church, we had more than our fair share of southern ladies who loved to cook. I fit in well because I was a single guy who loved to eat. Our potlucks were major events. I counted of those potlucks for my survival. While others were planning to cook, I was studying my kitchen shelves to see what I could offer. The result was pitiful: one of my better offerings was an unopened sack of chips, another time I took a half-empty jar of peanuts.

Wasn't much, but no one ever complained. Those ladies would take my jar of peanuts and set it on the long table with the rest of the food and hand me a plate. 'Go ahead. Don't be bashful. Fill up your plate.' And I would! Mashed potatoes and gravy. Roast beef. Fried chicken. I came like a pauper and ate like a king. The Apostle would have loved the symbolism. He would say that Christ did this for us, letting us come as paupers and making us royalty.

As the carol states. There is nothing to "dismay" or to make us distraught. He victory has been won. You are free. There is no point denying it or trying to earn it. You are free. No ifs, ands, or buts. So why are we clinging to what enslaves us? Why is the darkness so attractive to us? Can I simply suggest that it is because we don't truly believe the power of what Christ has done and continues to do.

I have said so many times to you all that "all theology is transformative". If you really believe something it will make a difference in your life. That goes, especially, for what this carol is talking about.

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Let nothing to dismay. As the Apostle Paul insisted in Romas 8 and I firmly believe: “Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Do you believe this? If so, you can rest; be at peace. And this my friends are truly tidings of comfort and joy.