

Isaiah 26:16–19; Psalm 68:4–11; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Luke 2:1–14 or 2:1–20

A Sermon Only God Could Write

1. The season of Christmas is one which brings with it cultural and family traditions
 - a. Each one of us has some traditions we hold dear, whether they're from our growing up, or something we've created along the way.
 - b. I noticed one such tradition, if you can call it that, advertised on TV recently
 - i. There is a cable network which will broadcast the 1983 film "A Christmas Story" non-stop in a 24-hour marathon starting tonight.
 - ii. I happen to be a Christmas Story fan, but in case you don't know what I'm talking about, this is the story of a young family, where one of their two sons, "Ralphie" narrates as an adult a series of memories from his childhood
 - iii. Precious in those memories was his biggest wish for a Christmas present: an official Red Ryder carbine-action, 200-shot range model air rifle
 - iv. But of course, all the adults in his life feared such a choice, warning him by saying (all together now): "You'll shoot your eye out"
 - v. I don't know who would watch the whole 24-hour marathon, but I can picture people flipping through channels, landing on this classic, and lingering a little bit, knowing what would come next and maybe even knowing the lines.
 - c. Maybe that's not your speed. Maybe you prefer your once-a-year watching of "It's a Wonderful Life" or "White Christmas" or going to the IRT to see "A Christmas Carol"
 - d. These wonderful stories, with their heart-felt messages, tug at our heartstrings and evoke comforting memories
 - e. They are stories we know well. We know what to expect from them.
 - f. The story of the birth of Jesus is one which we may come to once a year expecting the same message which matches our memories of the season. But it is so much more
2. If you came tonight to listen to the story of the birth of Jesus, looking for hope in a moment of despair, you and I could write that sermon. All the elements are there:
 - a. Mary and Joseph traveled to the city of David, Bethlehem
 - b. There she gives birth to her first son, a holy child, as promised by the angel of God
 - c. And in the fields, shepherds witnessed angels proclaiming that the Savior had been born, and they rushed to the tiny town to meet the child
 - d. The people had grown weary of the oppression of the Roman Empire, and this birth signaled for them the beginning of their salvation. Glory to God in the highest heaven!
3. If you came to take Mary at her word that justice will prevail and the upside down realm of God is upon us, you and I could write that sermon. All the elements are there:
 - a. Just last Sunday we heard Mary's song predicting the removal of the powerful from their thrones
 - b. And here is the Son of God born in a humble manger, and lowly shepherds are the first guests of honor to the celebration

- c. Somehow you get the feeling that the life of this child will set history on a new course
 - d. Through this child, God is present with us in a way that feels like the way it always should have been.
- 4. But if you came tonight thinking that this story is so well known, comforting, predictable, if you thought that God has no more surprises up God's sleeve, then neither you nor I can write this sermon. This is a sermon God alone can write.
 - a. There is nothing predictable about
 - i. God becoming human just to get us to return to God
 - ii. God turning to those overlooked and even mocked in society, to be the cast for God's play of salvation
 - b. This story of the birth of Jesus, isn't just a single point in history, a moment to remember with fondness and gratitude
 - i. It is also the affirmation of a pattern God had used countless times
 - ii. The proclamation that God doesn't use the ways of humans to speak to us
 - c. Though the Savior was born all those years ago, it is still a message that resonates the loudest with those in our community
 - i. Who traveled here from far pushed by forces larger than themselves
 - ii. Who find no home for their families in the usual places
 - iii. Who have to work third shift to make ends meet
 - iv. Who have all but given up as everything and everyone seems to be against them
- 5. The story of God's love for us, then as today, is written by God off the beaten path.
 - a. It starts, not in palaces or mansions, nor in the spotlight.
 - b. It plays out in unexpected corners of the city,
 - i. in humble living rooms
 - ii. in the dormitory at a shelter or in a tent in the woods
 - iii. in hospital corridors,
 - iv. in an AA meeting
 - v. in a school counselor's office.
 - c. That's not where it remains, of course.
 - d. The story of God's love is "good news of great joy for all the people"
 - e. But that it starts in those unexpected places, that it is understood perhaps best by those who hear the story there, means that they're preaching the sermon we need to hear this night
 - f. The shepherds told their story to Mary and Joseph and those surrounding the child.
 - g. "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" and they kept telling their story.

Listen, then, on this Christmas Eve and every day of the year, listen to the sermon God is preaching of God's grace in unexpected places, of God's love which turns the world upside down, of God's redemption told by those who have felt redemption deep in their bones, of God's salvation in the lips of those who had lost everything. Those preachers are our neighbors, our relatives, those strangers traveling through town, those unhoused folk we know by name, just as it was the shepherds who preached it that one special night. Listen, and believe them.