

Christmas Eve Sermon 2011

Luke 2

I heard the other day that there is a man named Fred Honercamp who coaches mall Santas on how to deal with the requests from kids. We all know that Santa has many helpers all over the malls to give him a hand. So the question from the interviewer was, Have you noticed any difference in recent years in what kids might ask for?

Mr. Honercamp said, “We have. Children are little barometers of their environment, and they'll put a hand up to Santa's ear and whisper something like, can you get Daddy a job, or can you help us sell our house? And in each of those cases, we say that we can't get Daddy a job. We can't sell your house. What we can do is Mrs. Claus and I know that you're going through a tough time, and we'll get down on our knees tonight and say a special prayer just for you and your family.”

And then he continues, “But we've also seen the flip side of the economy. Boys and girls come up and say, Santa, we know that it's difficult for some families this year. Would you please bring my presents to somebody who can really use them?”

“It's just heartbreaking. Just the other day, we had a young boy that came in, and he said, Santa, can I get a new pair of sneakers? And I thought it was one of the list of presents, and I said, Oh, wonderful. What else can I get you? And he said, that's all. If you can just get me a pair of sneakers that don't hurt my feet, I'll be happy.”

This has been a hard year for a lot of people, I know for some people in this sanctuary. We come together tonight because we need to hear that somehow in the darkness of life, God's light is going to find a way to break through.

Christmas is all about God putting God's Word into action. You can be the best coach in the world, but if the plays on the clipboard don't get put into action on the field, nothing changes. Christmas is about God calling a new play that's never been seen before. I heard the story of little Alexandra Scott this week. She was diagnosed with childhood cancer when she was less than a year old. When she was four, she told her parents she wanted to start a lemonade stand to raise money to help doctors find a cure for cancer. You know, make lemonade out of lemons?

Her older brother Patrick helped her, and after word about what she was doing spread, she made \$2000 on that first day of running her lemonade stand. Year after year, as long as she lived, she kept setting up that little stand. When she died in 2004 at eight years of age, she had helped raise \$1 million to fight childhood cancer. The foundation that helps carry on her work has raised \$50 million. Alex's belief that she could make things better for other children was put into action. It was made visible with a table and a chair and a pitcher of lemonade.

2000 years ago, God said to the angels, I need to make my will for this world more visible. God said to the angels, I need to take my game plan out onto the field. It's the fourth quarter, and we're behind. Something's got to change.

You know the story. Luke starts it out with the big picture- "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus." Augustus was the dictator of the most powerful empire in the world. He had provided stability and peace because he had his soldiers everywhere. And he knew how to count people and tax people in order to keep his armies strong and his roads repaired. His power went out to far flung parts of the empire, even to places like the little province of Palestine.

And if God was going to get a player on the field who would make a difference, you'd think maybe God would have chosen somebody in Rome, maybe God would have infiltrated the ruling Roman family, God would have made a move where there would have been the real potential for power. But God had other plans that seemed about as powerful as a little girl at a lemonade stand. God said get me a table and a chair and a pitcher. God decides to use a working-class family, a carpenter named Joseph and his fiancée Mary, who is almost due with her first child. They have to go register for the census and pay their taxes, traveling 80 miles from Nazareth, not to Rome, not to the center of power, but to Joseph's family home of Bethlehem.

They arrive in town; Mary is exhausted, and just needs to lie down. But all the inns are full up, and they have to sleep with the animals. And that's the night when God enters human history in a new way, not in Roman splendor but in the humbleness of a feeding trough. And there are only dirty shepherds and even dirtier sheep that take notice.

And why does God come to visit this planet this way? I wonder if it's because so often we're often tempted by power. If we just had more of this or that, we could control our lives better; if we could just control and have power over the things that worry us: our health, our family, our future. And we expect God to be like the power of Rome: to come in and repair everything in our lives, or blow away the opposition to our best laid plans. And God instead sneaks quietly into our lives and is born in strange places and in humble ways.

God comes in quietly to rearrange the priorities of our world. God comes to turn the tables, to create a new system, to establish a new kingdom. Isaiah says that the child born to us will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Could anybody here use a wonderful counselor, a new image for a father, does this world need a prince of peace? My goodness, yes.

God comes into our world in Jesus not just to change us around the edges a little bit, but to transform us and resurrect us. And God comes to visit us in Jesus to show us that there's something more in life than a more comfortable home or a better retirement. Those things are nice, but they don't save us. They don't satisfy the deep longing in us for meaning and purpose in life.

So God comes to the edge of our world. God comes through the blood, sweat and tears of a young mother in labor as she gives birth, to say that God is connected in a very real way to our story. God will not stop coming to us until we all can hear the words "for you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord."

By the way, when Emperor Augustus died in 14AD, Jesus was a teenager growing up in Mary and Joseph's house, and Augustus was declared a Roman god. And the Roman emperors began to be worshiped as gods. And whenever a new Roman emperor was born, messengers would declare that peace had come to the world.

So when the angels tell the shepherds, Unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord, they were saying, The emperor isn't Lord! Jesus is! And when they tell the shepherds, Peace among those whom he favors, they are saying, The emperor or any political power won't bring true peace. It's got to be the way of Jesus.

Jesus is Lord. The way of Jesus brings peace.

I don't watch "NCIS," but another pastor told me about an episode that takes place on Christmas Eve, when an assassination plot is going on. A woman is giving birth in the back seat of a car, with bullets flying all around. And somebody in the car with her has a choice to make. There is a gun lying on the car seat, and yet the baby is about to arrive. Does he catch the baby or pick up the gun? And all you hear is the music to "Silent Night."

God comes to us as a baby in Bethlehem to say to the world, I will show you a different way of power, the power of reconciliation and not violence, the power of love and not hatred. So Luke is making a political statement when the angels say, *Christ the Lord* is born today. *Jesus* is Lord, not any emperor. Jesus is to be worshiped as Son of God, not any empire or political system.

Jesus will show a different kind of power: the power of forgiveness over revenge, the power of compassion over indifference, the power of love over hatred.

Some of you remember that on a January night in 1973, Senator John Stennis was arriving home in Washington DC when he was accosted by two young robbers. The 71-year-old Stennis was a Hawkish Democrat from Mississippi who supported the Vietnam War. He was the powerful head of the Senate Armed Services Committee. These two young teenagers held him up for his gold wristwatch, his wallet and a quarter in change.

And when he started hollering and carrying on, they panicked and shot him twice with a .22 caliber pistol. One of the bullets ruptured his pancreas, the other lodged in his left thigh. For six hours the doctors at Walter Reed Medical Center worked on him to save his life.

When the news went out on the radio that night, another senator was driving home, a senator at the opposite end of the political spectrum, a Republican "dove", Oregon's own Mark Hatfield, who had often clashed with Stennis.

Sen. Hatfield later said, "I had no skills to offer. But I knew there was something I must do- and that was to go to that hospital and be nearby where I could be helpful, if possible, to the family."

He got to the hospital where there was all kinds of confusion as senators and colleagues and friends and reporters gathered there. The hospital crew was understaffed and couldn't field all the calls and questions.

So Senator Hatfield scoped out the situation, spotted a switchboard that was unattended, and began to answer the phones. He worked all night. He never told the callers who he was, because he didn't want it to seem like he wanted any political gain out of it. In the morning, he stood up, stretched, put on his overcoat, and said as he walked away, "My name is Hatfield. I'm happy to help out on behalf of a man I deeply respect."

Senator Hatfield was displaying a different kind of power, the power of sacrificial love. Why does God come to a little corner of the mighty Roman Empire? Because God wants to show us the power of a different kingdom: the power of love for people who are different from us, the power of forgiveness that lets us move on into new life, the power of sacrificial love that really does change our world, the power of love that gets translated into justice for all people. That's what God shows us in the life of Jesus, God made flesh. We see God's priorities in Jesus.

This new year will bring what new years bring: We will welcome new life and we will need to say goodbye. We will succeed and we will fall on our faces. We will need to forgive and we will need to be forgiven. And every day we will be given the opportunity to let the life of Christ be born in us. God will come along on the edges of life, giving us the power to be a new kind of people.

Christmas isn't just about an event that happened 2000 years ago. Let's make room for the presence of the living Christ to be born in us again day after day. Amen.