

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

All I Want for Christmas Is You

December 24, 2020

Rev. Kelley L. Becker

One of my favorite childhood Christmas memories is of the day, each year, when the Sears catalogue came in the mail. Who remembers the Sears catalogues? You guys...they were glorious. The cover usually pictured very happy children, wearing Christmas pajamas and playing with the awesome toys they had just received for Christmas. Inside the pages of the catalogue, were toys...so many toys. The goal of any child looking at the catalogue was to use it to formulate their official Christmas list. But it wasn't that simple.

There was a right way to do it. The first time through the catalogue was quick, just to get an idea about how it was laid out and to spot the toys I had seen on TV or heard friends talk about. The second time through took a lot longer. When I came to a page with a toy being considered for the official Christmas list, I would turn the corner of the page down. By the end of the second time through the catalogue, there were a good number of pages tuned down.

The third time through only involved the pages with the corners turned down. It was decision-making time. I would carefully go through the pages and circle the items that had made the final cut...the items that would make up my official Christmas list. Those were the items I would write to Santa about. And of those items, there would be one I would select to talk to Santa about when I went to visit him. I mean...after all, he has a lot of children to listen to. I kept it simple and then mentioned that I had already mailed the full list to him.

Having heard this story of how I managed my yearly Christmas list, it will not surprise you that my favorite Christmas movie is *The Christmas Story*. Ralphie, the main character, knew what he wanted for Christmas. He wanted a Red Ryder Carbine Action 200-shot Range Model Air Rifle. He wanted it so badly. He knew everything about it. He dreamt of the adventures he would have with the trusty Red Ryder at his side.

Have you ever wanted anything that much? I can think of a couple of times as a child when I really, really wanted something. One year, I wanted a Cabbage Patch doll so badly that I had dreams about it. They were advertised everywhere. All my friends wanted one too. I was truly worried there wouldn't be enough for everyone. I was thrilled to unwrap my doll on Christmas morning. That was a long time ago.

What about now? What do you want for Christmas this year? 2020 has helped us change our perspectives on a lot of things, hasn't it? I wonder if your Christmas list, like mine, reflects that. 2020 began pretty well. There was some cold weather and the usual post-holiday slump in January and February, but for most of us, it didn't start awful. It was a new year, a fresh start. It was Leap Year...anything could happen! And then it did. March came along and it is as if a voice came over a loud speaker and said, "We interrupt this regularly scheduled year to bring you, isolation, fear, and chaos." Even then most of us didn't get it. We thought we would work at home for a while, curtail our social plans for a few weeks, cancel what we had going for spring break, and by the time Easter rolled around, we would celebrate having made it through the dark wilderness of Lent and COVID-19.

Now we know that was pretty naïve. Easter came and went, and we were kind of left, stuck in the darkness. So much has happened since then. People we love have gotten sick and worse, some of us are grieving hard. Jobs we thought were secure forever have disappeared, making finances tenuous for some of our neighbors, maybe for some of us. We've missed birthday parties, football games, vacations, graduations, weddings, and even funerals. COVID-19 has interrupted everything.

I imagine Mary and Joseph felt some of what we are feeling. Their lives were interrupted too, as they set out for Bethlehem to be registered. Certainly, they had other things going on and the last thing any woman who is "great with child" wants to do, I would think, is travel long distances on foot...or on a donkey. They didn't have a choice about this interruption. When the Romans said "jump," they had to jump.

Even in the sea of people in Bethlehem, it must have felt really lonely. They were exhausted from the journey. How hard it was to hear the innkeeper say there was

no room for them. Their moods must have matched the darkness of the evening, the darkness of Roman occupation. The offer of the stable was a relief, shelter out of the cool night air, and a little privacy. The animals were already resting for the night. There was an empty corner and the innkeeper had given them blankets to lay on and cover up with.

The baby came faster than most first babies. It wasn't long and Mary held him in her arms. She had never felt love like that. She knew in her heart that her world, the world, was changed forever. In those moments, when Mary and Joseph were alone with him in the stable, they must have felt the weight of raising a child; a child who was born into a world that desperately needed to know a different way, a way out of the darkness of oppression, injustice, and the violence of war. I imagine the Mary and Joseph clinging to each other and wondering together, "Now what?"

Into their uncertainty and questions, walked the shepherds. While the new parents sat wondering if they had gotten it all wrong, the shepherds showed up with their story of shiny angels, good news and great joy. They came convinced that God was up to something special in that stable and they wanted to see it for themselves. While the shepherds were there, Mary and Joseph were not alone. For a little while, in the company of a rather rough around the edges crew of shepherds, the night almost seemed calm. That night in the stable, amid the isolation, fear, and chaos of the Romans' oppressive reign, God interrupted, with the gifts of community, love, and peace.

And tonight, amid the isolation, fear, and chaos of a pandemic, God has interrupted again, this time for us. Under a canopy, in cars, and gathered around screens at home, the story of ordinary people; Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, and a tiny baby, reminds us that even today, even for us, God interrupts darkness with Light. Anyone who has ever stood in a dark room and lit a candle knows that even a little bit of Light changes everything. For Mary and Joseph that light came in the form of the offer of a stable, the birth of a son, the assurance and company of the shepherds. For us, the Light is reflected in the ancient words of a familiar story, the melodies of carols we have sung since we were young, and on the faces of the dear ones gathered here, showing us that we are not alone.

Yes, our Christmas lists look much different this year. Everything has changed, including our perspectives on what is essential. We wish for good health, security, paid bills, hugs, and time with friends and family. As I stand here, looking at your faces, thinking about the year you have had, what you have trudged through and how courageously you have faced it, I realize that, while there is still plenty to wish for, God has given us a glimpse of hope in the sparkle of each other's eyes, the sound of our voices singing together, and the warmth of one another's presence. And it makes me think that maybe...All I really wanted for Christmas was YOU. Merry Christmas!