

The Faith of Christmas

Luke 2:8-10, Christmas Eve

December 24, 2016

Recently I **learned about a family**—living in Colorado—with four school-aged children still at home. For several years now—it has become their **annual tradition** to wake up very early on the **2nd Saturday of every December**. That's when the **whole family piles** into their SUV and **Dad drives** them to their favorite **Pancake House!** There, they all eat breakfast together!

After breakfast the family then **climbs back** into their SUV—to go out in search of hopefully **finding and bringing home the “perfect” Christmas tree.**

No, they do not travel to some of the places where many of us might go to find our Christmas tree—to such places like **FOOD LION** or **KROGER** or **LOWE'S** or to **HOME DEPOT!** Instead they drive **30 miles** away from that restaurant to a beautiful **Christmas tree farm**, where on some Saturdays in recent years, they have been known to spend **over 2 hours** out there in the cold—searching for the right tree—one that is not **TOO TALL**, or **TOO THIN** but one that is just **THE RIGHT SHAPE**. That's when their tree is purchased, cut down and taken home!

Last year, however, **building** a proper sense of **consensus among all the members of the family was a more difficult task than ever before**—and not because there was any lack of beautiful trees available. The problem was that the youngest child in the family, a **five-year old daughter named Jeannine** believed that she had come of age and wanted to put her 2 cents in on this important family decision too!

No matter which tree the rest of the family endorsed, for 5-year old Jeannine, **her vote was always a “Thumb's Down!”**

Rather than searching for the perfect tree, Jeannine said: ***“I AM LOOKING FOR A TREE THAT ISN'T PERFECT; ONE THAT NEEDS ME—ONE THAT I CAN TAKE HOME—ONE THAT WE CAN TAKE HOME AND MAKE BEAUTIFUL!”***

Brothers and sisters on that cold Saturday morning of December 12, 2015 in Colorado, **JEANNINE REFLECTED THE ATTITUDE OF GOD!**

THE FAITH OF CHRISTMAS IS THAT OUR GOD DOES NOT JUST CATER TO THE “BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE” OF THIS WORLD, THE WEALTHY AND THE EDUCATED! Nor does our God cater only to those people who might be classified as the “morally superior” people in some way! Instead our God invites all of us with our sin-stained lives to journey with those shepherds, once again by faith this night to Bethlehem—**TO COME AND BEHOLD HIM, BORN THE KING OF ANGELS!**

THE FAITH OF CHRISTMAS IS THAT OUR GOD ENTERED OUR WORLD ONE NIGHT IN THE GIFT OF HIS ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON TO ACCEPT US JUST THE WAY WE ARE!

The shepherds of Bethlehem remind us that God does not favor the beautiful people. The shepherds were as **common as the sheep** they cared for, and most of the time no cleaner. They were what some **city-slickers** today might designate as the **“Rednecks of Judea!”** And they **certainly were not known for their honesty—either—these shepherds!** It was said that they **often borrowed things from others that they had no intention of ever returning.** Most were suspected to be thieves, with a reputation of being so notoriously dishonest that they were not allowed to be called as a witness to give their testimony in a court of law!

Yet the irony of it all is that even though these shepherds were thought by many of the good religious people—to **be totally beyond the reach of God’s salvation**—it was precisely to these shepherds—that the Christmas angel first came, **in all of its brilliant glory that bedazzled them!** *“Fear not,”* the angel said, *“for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy that shall be to you and to all people! For unto you is born this night, in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord”* (Luke 2:11)!

Perhaps St. Paul put it best one day when he wrote these words to his friends in Rome: *“For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us! For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life”* (Romans 5:6-10)!

SECONDLY: JESUS CHRIST IS THE PROMISED SAVIOR OF THIS WORLD!

Let’s remember that the angel who came to Joseph in a dream told him to name Mary’s Child **“Jesus,”** which means **“God saves,”** because he would be born into our world **to save us** from our sins!

Jesus has lots of titles given to him in the Bible: Lord, Master, the HOLY ONE WHO ALONE HAS THE WORDS OF ETERNAL LIFE, the Redeemer and the Rabbi! And let’s not overlook all those beautiful names given to Christ in our Old Testament lesson this evening! He is our Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting

Father and the Prince of Peace. **But his first and foremost title is always Savior.**

There have always been those human beings, however, in every age **who do not believe that we are by nature sinful**, but inherently good—and that with just enough education and tender-loving care, **MORAL VIRTUES WILL EVENTUALLY OVERRULE ALL BAD BEHAVIOR** in a person's life, in much the same way that our **permanent teeth** replace our **baby teeth**, when our baby teeth have fallen out!

But this is not what our Savior teaches us, who proclaimed one day: ***“Unless a man is born again by water and the Spirit, he can in no way enter the kingdom of God, for that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:5-6)!***

Because they don't believe that GOD WILL ONE DAY MEET OUT HIS PERFECT JUSTICE IN THIS WORLD, THEY NO LONGER BELIEVE IN THE REALITY OF HEAVEN AND HELL, THEY NO LONGER SEE ANY NEED FOR THEM TO HAVE A SAVIOR!

THE FAITH OF CHRISTMAS IS THAT OUR GOD TAKES US EXACTLY AS WE ARE THAT MIGHT REMAKE US EVERY DAY MORE AND MORE INTO THE IMAGE OF HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON!

SECONDLY, THE FAITH OF CHRISTMAS IS THAT JESUS WAS BORN INTO OUR WORLD TO BE OUR SAVIOR, WITH THE SHADOW OF CALVARY'S CROSS ALREADY OVERSHADOWING THAT NEWBORN INFANT'S CRADLE—A MANGER BED OF STRAW!

THIRDLY, THE FAITH OF CHRISTMAS IS THAT YOU CAN I CAN COME TO JESUS EMPTY-HANDED!

Yes, the wise Men brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But the shepherds brought nothing but humble and contrite hearts and a glimmer of faith.

God is unlike any earthly dignitary. He is not impressed by our achievements or credentials or resumes. In approaching Him, we don't need any letter of endorsement from other people. Our God calls and welcome everyone into a living, vital relationship with himself who will but come with a humble and contrite heart and a glimmer of faith.

The Victorian poet, Christina Rossetti, penned these immortal words of Christmas:

"What shall I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd,
I'd give him a lamb! If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part!
But such as I am, I give to him my heart!"

BUT THERE IS A FOURTH AND FINAL THING THE SHEPHERDS TEACH US: "ONCE YOU MEET JESUS AND HAVE COME TO GENUINELY KNOW HIM, BY THE GRACE OF GOD, YOU CAN'T HELP BUT TELL OTHERS ABOUT HIM TOO! St. Luke tells us that ***after the shepherds saw Jesus: "...They made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child; and all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them" (Luke 2:17-18)!***

Imagine that! The first evangelists on earth were those lowly, foul-smelling shepherds. They were the very first to say: *"We have seen the Lord!"*

I once saw this good advice on a church's outdoor sign somewhere: **"KEEP THE FAITH, BUT NOT TO YOURSELF!"**

The next time someone asks, "What do you know good?" Don't mumble something like "Nothin' much." Say **"God is good, all the time,"** or **"The good Lord is treating me better than I deserve."**

I'm not asking you to preach. Just look for opportunities to say a simple, unpretentious word about the Lord. God will honor it and through his Holy Spirit use it.

This is what the shepherds did—they went on to spread the good news all-over the Bethlehem region. Surely you and I can spread it through our offices, golf clubs, and neighborhoods.

Well for the COLLEGE FOOTBALL FANS OF THE SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE, HERE TONIGHT, THE LAST NAME OF "BOWDEN" WILL CERTAINLY RING A BELL!

Bobby Bowden was the head football coach at Florida State University for 33 seasons, from 1976 to 2009. And Bobby had two sons who both became the head football coaches at various universities also. The **OLDER SON TOMMY** was the head football coach at Clemson University from 1999 to 2008. The **YOUNGER SON TERRY** is still the head football coach at Akron University, but who also served as the head football coach at Auburn University for five years from 1993 to 1998.

In 1993 both Bobby Bowden of FSU and his younger son Terry at Auburn were both nominated that year for the very prestigious BEAR BRYANT AWARD of the SEC.

When Terry was announced to be the winner of that award and a big banquet also attended by his father, no one in that room could have been prouder or happier than his father!

When Terry Bowden was presented the award—that night—in his acceptance speech—Terry Bowden **thanked his team, his fellow coaches at Auburn University and then he thanked his family.**

“I owe so much to my parents!” **he said.** “Many of you in this room know my mother and how special she is, but let me tell you something about my father I will never forget!

Mom and Dad always took us to church and to Sunday school every Sunday, and even when we were out of town on a vacation, my father was always very diligent in finding a church where we could all go and worship the Lord on Sunday mornings.

One Sunday, however, Dad took us to the one church—where the people in that worship service were much more “emotional” than we had ever experienced before!

Like always though Mom and Dad had marched us down to the front pew. Mom sat on one end of the pew and Dad on the other end of the pew, with us 5 kids squeezed between them to make sure we’d all behave!

The preacher in that church was different than any other preacher we had witnessed before—shouting sometimes at the congregation and pounding the pulpit for added emphasis!

Well, the next thing you know—this preacher began looking around the whole sanctuary for someone to single out . . . when all of a sudden he spotted my father there on the front pew—Bobby Bowden—even though he didn’t know it was Bobby Bowden!

“You sir!” the preacher said, looking directly at my Dad, “Do you have faith!”

“Yes, I have faith!” my Dad proudly answered.

'The preacher said, 'If I put a 2 x 4 down there on the floor, do you have enough faith to walk across it?' **'Yes, I could do that' my Dad replied!**"

"But said the preacher, what if I took that same 2 x 4 and placed it across two of the tallest buildings in New York City...would you have enough faith to walk across it then?

'No, I don't have that much faith,' my Dad answered.

'But what if somebody were standing on the other end,' said the preacher, 'and dangling one of your children off the side... would you cross the board then?'"

Terry Bowden said that this is exactly when his father decided that the preacher's interrogating him had gone too far, so in an attempt to lighten things up a bit, Mr. Bowden stood up and took a good hard look at each of his children seated there on the front pew between him and their mother, then looked back at the preacher and said: **"Which one?"**

Now, of course, Bobby Bowden was just kidding around because the Bowden family always was a close-knit, loving family...that loved to joke around with each other, but the point I want to make is this: **Our Father God never says, "Which one?"** He never has said and he never will say, **"Which one should I lay my life on the line for?" For God so love the world... Our God wants to bring every one of us into the circle of his mercy and grace.**

St Peter says in 2 Peter 3:9, "This is the God who is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance and be saved!"

You know how St. John sums it all up about Jesus in the opening prologue of his fourth Gospel account: "Jesus came to his own people and his own people received him not. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, to them he gave power—to become children of God, who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God! And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the father, full of grace and truth! (John 1:12-14). Amen