

SOUTHERN COMFORT
© Rev. Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Comfort
December 28, 2008

Reading: Luke: 2:7 (English Standard Version)
And she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

I grew up on the Gulf Coast of Florida. I must say that Christmas on the Gulf Coast is not too different from any of the other five states where I have celebrated that day. The scenery was of pine, palm, and live oak. No snow. The weather could be cold or balmy. We did not worry about the fact that we did not have chimneys. Somehow Santa got in the house and that was all that mattered.

Typically we attended the Christmas Eve candlelight service at our church. This was followed by the Moravian love feast of coffee and hot cross buns. On Christmas morning we woke to the marvel of the gifts under the tree. Our stockings were filled with citrus fruit, candies, walnuts, and pecans. Breakfast was pecan waffles, sausage, and coffee. That is a tradition that we maintain in our house to this day. I have never celebrated Christmas morning without pecan waffles.

In the early afternoon we went to my grandparents' house. These would be my mother's parents. Great Memaw, as she became known,

often made our Christmas presents. She made dresses for her granddaughters and their dolls. I remember the red, green, and gold vests she made for me one year. Another year she made a lounging jacket. We were not allowed to call it a smoking jacket. Of course she purchased gifts for us, but I do not remember any of them.

Another treat that she offered her family was food. Everyone was allowed to request one special dish for the Christmas dinner. She cooked rice for my uncle; biscuits for my father; and sweet potato soufflé for my aunt. One of my favorite Christmas dishes is ambrosia, made with grapefruit, oranges, pecans, and shredded coconut. Citrus trees grew in just about everybody's backyard and there was gracious plenty to share with neighbors who had none. When my grandmother was no longer able to prepare such large meals we moved the tradition to my mother's house. My grandmother lived to be one hundred, and died in 2007.

At some point in the Christmas season we went to my uncle's house. My favorite memory is of his Christmas tree. It was decorated with those old candles with water bubbling in them. My least favorite memory of that visit is the lima beans my aunt insisted on preparing and my father demanding that we eat. The funniest person in that house was my aunt's mother whom we called "Grandma Brown." Her house was

right next-door. It had a German alpine feel to it, and was filled with Hummel figurines and cuckoo clocks. One Christmas she was given a crocheted toilet seat cover. She did not recognize its purpose. She put it on her head thinking it was a bonnet. She wore it all afternoon.

The season was finished with the Watch Night service on New Year's Eve. It was a church service and party that included hymns and prayers. It was a place teens could go and be safe.

Now if you thought this sermon was about the alcoholic beverage, "Southern Comfort," I am sorry to disappoint you. That Southern Comfort might have been added to the eggnog, but on its own was considered an inferior beverage. It might suffice as an after dinner cordial if there was no brandy in the house. Alcoholic consumption at Christmas was very modest and drunkenness would have been thought unbecoming a Southern gentleman.

No, the Southern Comfort I am speaking of is the abundance and generosity of my family. We were truly blessed by the providence of God. Proximity allowed us to be together on Christmas. I can even remember the presence of my great grandfather who said the blessing. His prayer was so mumbled and inaudible you had no idea what he said or when he was finished until he demanded, "Pass the biscuits." Crazy Aunt

Ruth would come over from Tampa with her latest boyfriend who typically was disappointed that the liquid Southern Comfort was not in sight. When it was all over we loaded the car with all of the presents and wondered if there would be enough room for the passengers and the food that Great Memaw sent home with us.

Our family's Christmas is such a contrast with that of Mary and Joseph crowded out of the local inn, forced into a common stable. Yet it is that stable scene that we are called back to during this time of the year. I remember when Emily was about seven years old.

However different we are from first century Bethlehem, Christmas continues to be a time for family, however strange or funny, wealthy or poor, complicated or dysfunctional. Christmas is for families, however configured or blended or far apart. Today a family might be a traditional nuclear family; or families headed by grandparents; gay or lesbian families; or the single parent family. Our friends in Walton have decided that most of us have families spread far and wide. We have decided that we are the closest family we have got. I guess we have all been adopted.

Even in the most broken families I have known, Christmas continues to be about the hope of family wholeness. Dare I even say that Christmas is a hope for the human family, including our Jewish

grandparents, Hindu cousins, Buddhist aunts and uncles, Muslim in-laws, and our Christian brothers and sisters?

This is where my understanding of Christmas has grown since the provincial days of childhood. I think we do not understand the story of Bethlehem if we think that this is exclusively a Christian story. I believe that the birth of a child is a hope for the world. It does not matter what color your skin, the accent of your speech, religious affiliation, or cultural mores. The birth of a child is about the future and its possibilities for humankind. Indeed, I have never met a mother who did not think to herself, “this child is Immanuel, God with us.” And some mothers are fortunate enough to get through their child’s puberty still believing that! I am reminded of the saying that all Jewish men think their mothers are virgins. And all Jewish mothers think their son is the messiah.

Yet what tragic irony that the world is so indifferent, nay even hostile, to children. Children have been consistent victims of systemic abuse and neglect. Matthew (2: 16b-18) reports that when King Herod learned of the birth of Jesus he was “infuriated and killed all of the children in and around Bethlehem, who were two years old or older, according to a time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what have been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

A voice was heard in Ramah
Wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
She refused to be consoled,
Because they are no more.”

A good Biblical scholar would tell you that there is no record in the ancient archives that such an event ever took place. But don't let that dissuade you from a larger truth. In fact, first century Palestine was a hostile environment for children, and many mothers named Rachael wept for their lost children. The twenty-first century is also a dangerous environment for children. They are at risk for abuse and neglect, child trafficking, war, HIV/AIDS, and starvation. This Christmas week in Corvina, California, Bruce Pardo dressed as Santa Claus. He knocked on the door of his estranged in-laws. An eight-year-old little girl opened the door. Pardo shot her in the face and then went on a killing spree that left nine people dead. Six million children die every year from hunger related illness. Most experts agree that the problem is not supply. The problem is politics. We can, in fact, feed the children of the world, but we do not seem to have the political will to do so.

This apathy, the failure of government and politicians, was the fundament complaint of the prophet Isaiah. Peace and justice are too far removed from the reality of many children in the world. They never

experience a Southern Comfort Christmas. Heavens, they never experience the relative peace of Christmas at Bethlehem. Too many children suffer political indifference. And when that happens declared the prophet, “Justice is turned back, and righteousness at a distance.” As long as children suffer the consequences of social apathy, “truth stumbles in the public square and uprightness cannot enter.” As long as children are exploited, “Truth is lacking and whoever turns from evil is despoiled.” (See Isaiah 59) Our purpose as a nation is corrupted and our religious proclamations ring hollow, especially at Christmas tide, in the face of the slaughter of the innocents.

It is my hope is that as we open the last package mailed too late for Christmas Day; as we bundle up the bags and boxes for re-cycling; and as we stow away the ornaments and lights for next year we will keep hope alive for the children of the world.

I mentioned to you a couple of weeks ago that University Congregational Church is the only congregation participating in Schools in Community. You remember all of the tags on the tree in Fellowship Hall. I hope you got to see the abundance of gifts that you gave to those children. It is my understanding that our largesse to those families is the largest contribution of gifts by any other agency or business. I am told

that when our members delivered our packages the volunteers of Operation Holiday wept. If you will allow the metaphor, what a Southern Comfort you have been to these families and children who have no idea who you are.

Lutheran pastor, member of the Nazi resistance, friend and biographer, Eberhard Bethge wrote on July 18, 1944:

“To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) as the basis of some method or other, but to be a man – not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.”

Please do not pack up the Southern Comfort until next Christmas.

Despite the nation’s economic recession, despite the severe cuts we are making to our own church’s budget, let us keep our hearts and hands open to those less fortunate. In a few weeks you will receive a revised budget. You will see that we have trimmed our church’s operating expenses to the bone. A friend of mine in New England reports that many congregations are doing the same thing. This next year we will need to engage in fund raising for Outreach. We will make appeals for special projects for the poor. I know that it is in your heart to bring comfort to Rachael and all her children. I hope that each and every one of us will roll up our sleeves

and do the work of God's comfort. I do not doubt for a moment that you will do it. And after a day of feeding the hungry, erecting a Habitat house, or stocking the food pantry I will be pleased to stand you a round of Southern Comfort!

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