

"THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE"

I'M GOING TO ASK YOU TO DO SOMETHING TONIGHT THAT I DOUBT YOU'VE EVER BEEN ASKED TO DO DURING A SERMON ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

IN FACT, I DOUBT THAT YOU'VE EVER BEEN ASKED TO DO THIS WITH REGARD TO ANY SERMON YOU'VE EVER HEARD.

WHEN YOU HEAR ME SAY THAT – THAT I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING YOU'VE NEVER BEEN ASKED TO DO DURING A SERMON – YOUR FIRST THOUGHT IS PERHAPS THAT IT'S SIMPLY A PLOY TO CAPTURE YOUR ATTENTION.

YOUR SECOND THOUGHT MAY BE ANXIETY OR FEAR OR EVEN ANGER.

"OH, NO! I'VE COME TO WORSHIP JUST TO SIT HEAR & ENJOY THE SERVICE & HE'S GOING TO ASK ME TO DO SOMETHING I REALLY DON'T WANT TO DO. I DON'T WANT SOMETHING DIFFERENT. I JUST WANT TO SIT HERE & EXPERIENCE WORSHIP TONIGHT. I DON'T WANT TO PARTICIPATE IN THE SERMON. I DON'T WANT SOMETHING CHALLENGING OR CREATIVE OR 'OUTSIDE THE BOX.' I JUST WANT WHAT I TRADITIONALLY HAVE COME TO EXPECT ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

"IF I WANTED SOMETHING DIFFERENT, I WOULD HAVE EITHER GONE SOMEWHERE ELSE OR JUST STAYED HOME TONIGHT."

FAIR ENOUGH.

BUT, INTERESTINGLY, BOTH OF THOSE THOUGHTS YOU MAY HAVE HAD UPON HEARING ME SAY THAT I WANT YOU TO DO SOMETHING YOU'VE NEVER BEEN ASKED TO DO DURING A SERMON, FIT PERFECTLY WITH MY REQUEST OF YOU TONIGHT.

IT WASN'T A PLOY TO CAPTURE YOUR ATTENTION.

IT WASN'T SAID TO ASSURE ME THAT YOU WOULD LISTEN TO EVERY WORD I SAY TONIGHT.

IN FACT, WHAT I WANT YOU TO DO TONIGHT FOR THE NEXT FEW MINUTES IS PRECISELY THE OPPOSITE.

I WANT YOU TO *NOT* LISTEN TO ME.

I WANT YOUR THOUGHTS TO BE, NOT ON WHAT I'M SAYING, BUT ON WHERE WHAT I'M SAYING MAY TAKE YOU.

I WANT YOU TO DRIFT IN & OUT BUT THE BULK OF YOUR TIME SHOULD BE SPENT IN LISTENING TO YOURSELF OR LISTENING TO WHAT THE HOLY SPIRIT MAY BE SAYING TO YOU.

THAT SECOND THOUGHT YOU MAY HAVE HAD – THE ONE ABOUT NOT WANTING SOMETHING DIFFERENT – SOMETHING CREATIVE – SOMETHING OUTSIDE THE BOX – IS PROBABLY A WIDESPREAD SENTIMENT ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

I REMEMBER THE FIRST TIME I HAD FULL CONTROL OVER A CHRISTMAS EVE SERVICE AS A PASTOR. HAVING ARRIVED AT THE CHURCH THE PREVIOUS JUNE, I HEARD TIME & TIME AGAIN THAT NANCY MATTHEWS – A DAUGHTER OF ONE OF THE MEMBERS – ALWAYS SANG "O HOLY NIGHT" ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

IT WAS A LONG-STANDING TRADITION IN THAT CHURCH.

THAT FIRST CHRISTMAS EVE I WAS THERE, I MADE ARRANGEMENTS TO HAVE SOMEONE ELSE SING “O HOLY NIGHT.”

NEEDLESS TO SAY, IT DIDN’T WORK & THE NEXT YEAR & FOR MANY MORE, NANCY MATTHEWS SANG “O HOLY NIGHT” ON CHRISTMAS EVE.

IT WAS TRADITION & CHRISTMAS IS NO TIME TO BUCK TRADITION.

IT’S LIKE THE SECOND CHAPTER OF LUKE – THE ACCOUNT OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS.

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD THAT STORY?

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD THE STORY ABOUT THE SHEPHERDS FOLLOWING THE DIRECTIONS OF THE ANGELS AND FINDING MARY AND JOSEPH AND THE BABY JESUS LYING IN THE MANGER?

HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD THAT STORY, AND HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU SEEN IT PORTRAYED ON GREETING CARDS & HOW MANY TIMES HAVE YOU HEARD LINUS RECITE THOSE WORDS IN “A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS?”

CHRISTMAS IS LIKE THAT FOR US.

IT’S FILLED WITH THE FAMILIAR.

IT’S LOADED WITH WARM AND WONDERFUL FAMILY MEMORIES OF IMAGES THAT WE TREASURE AND HOLD DEAR, THAT WE WRAP AROUND OURSELVES EVERY CHRISTMAS.

THOSE MEMORIES MAKE US FEEL COMFORTED AND HOPEFUL.

THEY BRING US BACK TO CHILDHOOD - EVERY CHRISTMAS, YEAR AFTER YEAR AFTER YEAR.

YOU KNOW, THE TRUTH IS NO MATTER HOW FORWARD THINKING OR PROGRESSIVE WE MAY BELIEVE OURSELVES TO BE, EVERY CHRISTMAS WE ALL TURN INTO TRADITIONALISTS.

MOST OF US ARE ABSOLUTE SENTIMENTALISTS WHENEVER IT COMES TO THE CHRISTMAS SEASON.

WE DON’T WANT CHRISTMAS TO EVER CHANGE.

WE DON’T WANT TO EVER STOP HEARING THIS STORY IN LUKE.

WE NEVER WANT TO STOP SEEING THAT IMAGE OF THE BABY JESUS IN THE MANGER.

WE DON’T EVER WANT TO STOP SINGING OUR FAVORITE CHRISTMAS HYMNS.

WE NEVER WANT CHRISTMAS TO CHANGE.

BUT ISN’T IT IRONIC THAT WHAT WE WANT TO REMAIN THE SAME IS, IN FACT, A CELEBRATION OF THE GREATEST MOMENT OF CHANGE IN HUMAN HISTORY.

WE ARE, IN FACT, CELEBRATING A MOMENT WHEN GOD ENTERS INTO HISTORY AND NOTHING IS EVER THE SAME AFTER THAT MOMENT.

THIS YEAR, DURING ADVENT, WE’VE BEEN LOOKING AT SPECIFIC LINES FROM SOME OF OUR FAVORITE HYMNS OF THE SEASON.

HOW ABOUT THIS LINE FROM OUR CLOSING HYMN TONIGHT – “*THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE.*”

THE MORNING OF CHRIST'S BIRTH WAS A MOMENT WHEN ALL THE TRADITIONS OF THE AGES WERE FULFILLED.

BUT IT WAS ALSO A MOMENT THAT CHANGED EVERYTHING FOREVER.

IT WAS A MOMENT WHEN GOD'S REDEEMING GRACE ENTERED THE WORLD TO TELL US WE ARE LOVED, WE ARE ACCEPTED, WE ARE FORGIVEN, WE ARE REDEEMED BY GOD'S GRACE.

NOW I TOLD YOU I DIDN'T WANT YOU TO LISTEN TO ME TONIGHT.

I'M SURE SOME OF YOU HAVE ALREADY ACCOMMODATED THAT REQUEST.

YOU'RE SOMEWHERE ELSE RIGHT NOW, THINKING OF YOUR OWN TRADITIONS & YOUR OWN CHRISTMASSES PAST.

IF NOT – IF, FOR SOME REASON YOU'RE STILL WITH ME – I WANT TO ENCOURAGE YOU TO THINK ABOUT THE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED AT CHRISTMAS.

SINCE THE EVENT WE COMMEMORATE TONIGHT – THE BIRTH OF THE SAVIOR – IS A HAPPY & JOYOUS EVENT – I WANT YOU TO THINK OF HAPPY & JOYOUS MEMORIES OF CHRISTMASSES PAST.

I WANT YOU TO THINK OF THOSE MOMENTS THAT ARE IMBEDDED IN YOUR MEMORY FOREVER.

THEY'RE THERE, AREN'T THEY?

THERE WAS SOMEONE – MAYBE EVEN YOU – WHO MADE THOSE MOMENTS & THOSE MEMORIES SPECIAL. JUST GO THERE FOR A FEW MINUTES & FORGET I'M EVEN TALKING RIGHT NOW.

THERE ARE SUCH MOMENTS IN LIFE – MOMENTS THAT WE CAN CREATE OURSELVES.

THINK OF THE MOMENTS WE HAVE HEARD ABOUT TONIGHT.

THINK WHAT IT MUST HAVE BEEN LIKE FOR HEINRICH SUSO TO EXPERIENCE A MOMENT WHEN HE WAS IN THE PRESENCE OF ANGELS & THE SONG “*GOOD CHRISTIAN FRIENDS, REJOICE*” BURST INTO HIS HEART.

THINK OF THE MOMENT THAT PLACIDE WAS IN THAT COACH TRAVELING TO PARIS & THE HOLY SPIRIT INSPIRED HIM TO COMPOSE “*O HOLY NIGHT.*”

OR THINK OF A CHRISTMAS EVE WHEN A PARISH PRIEST, JOSEPH MOHR TOOK A POEM HE HAD WRITTEN TWO YEARS BEFORE, TO THE RESIDENCE OF THE MUSICIAN-SCHOOLTEACHER FRANZ GRUBER .

HE ASKED GRUBER TO SET THE WORDS TO A SIMPLE MELODY THAT COULD BE PLAYED ON GUITAR.

MOHR WANTED TO SING HIS WORDS SET TO MUSIC THAT VERY NIGHT AT MIDNIGHT MASS.

JUST A FEW HOURS LATER, ON DECEMBER 24, 1818, JOSEPH MOHR AND FRANZ GRUBER SANG “*SILENT NIGHT*” FOR THE FIRST TIME EVER IN ST. NICHOLAS CHURCH IN OBERNDORF, AUSTRIA, WITH MOHR ACCOMPANYING ON HIS GUITAR.

THE MEMORABLE MOMENTS YOU CREATE & EXPERIENCE MAY NOT HAVE SUCH A BROAD & LONG-LASTING IMPACT AS THOSE & YET THEY ARE EQUALLY IMPORTANT.

REMEMBER THOSE MOMENTS & BE AWARE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO CREATE MORE OF THEM.

IT WAS A MOMENT 2,000 YEARS AGO –*THE DAWN OF REDEEMING GRACE* - THAT PROVIDES US WITH A FOUNDATION FOR ALL THE OTHER MEMORABLE MOMENTS OF LIFE. AMEN.

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