

St James United Church

Message for December 31, 2023
First Sunday of Christmas/New Year's Eve



"Stories of Light" - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Readings: Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

As we continue celebrating Christmas and prepare to ring in a new year, I wanted to share a few stories that capture the spirit of the season. They aren't made up, albeit embellished a bit. They are based on true stories, are about real people.

My first story is set at an airport. And why not? At this time of year many people travel, often by air, especially in Newfoundland. Now air travel is stressful at the best of times, especially when you go through security. Well, one day a fairly frequent traveler was at the local airport when he got in line behind a woman who seemed really nervous. "She likely doesn't travel by plane very often," he thought. The bigger issue he learned was that she didn't speak English. With no one in the airport speaking her language, she was getting increasingly anxious with every interaction. As she was putting her stuff into the bin to go through the x-ray, the agent was giving her the talk about liquids, electronics, shoes, and the like. Well, the woman didn't understand and as you can imagine started to panic. Knowing how a situation like this can go, the traveler observing braced himself for a bad situation to get much worse. Instead the agent stopped what she was doing and gestured to the woman to take deep breaths. They took a few together and the woman began to calm down. In a few minutes she had regained her composure and was able to make it through security, all because the agent saw a fellow human who was struggling and gave her compassion.

My next story didn't take place at an airport but in a parking lot. As we well know, the lead up to the holiday can be very busy with all the shopping that we do. Even picking up essentials can be an ordeal. Well a few days before Christmas, a young person dashed into a store near their work to pick up some dog food. Big 20kg bags were on sale so how could they not? Those are tough to maneuver and given the weight they could only load the bag onto the bottom section of the cart like most of us would do. Then they paid and left the store. Now as I said, it was a big bag of dog food which made it a chore to push the cart, plus the need to keep an eye on all the cars. Given how busy it was they got stuck at the pedestrian crossing. One car went by, then another, and another. Everyone was too distracted to pay attention. Finally someone stopped and waved them through. They smiled and said thank you in that awkward "they can't hear me but I'll over pronounce it so they can see" kind of way. "Everything will be fine," they thought. But it soon wasn't as they crossed the paving. There was a slight incline, and the weight of the cart got the better of them. Soon it rolled away and smashed into a gutter. Cursing their luck under their breath, they dragged the cart, grinding along the gutter to the car.

“How will I ever lift this bag into the trunk,” they wondered. But then as they bent down, they noticed another pair of hands taking hold of the bag. It was the driver who’d let them through. They burst into tears and said thank you at least a dozen times and then started to laugh as the driver recounted the scene of the runaway cart from their point of view. As they wished each other Merry Christmas, the young person reflected on the power of a gesture of kindness.

My final story takes place on Christmas Day. A family had gathered around the tree opening presents. As so often happens on such a day the kids were getting stuck in, pulling off the paper and laughing with joy as they opened their presents while their parents looked on. But then one of the kids stopped. He grabbed the box that he had wrapped for his mom. All year long he had asked her about her favourite toy when she was his age. She told him each time that they moved around a lot and eventually she lost Molly, an American Girl doll. Each time his face was crestfallen. It wasn’t that morning though as he handed his mom a little box. In it was a small pair of glasses that she recognized right away. As he passed to her a second larger box, she started to cry. She knew what was coming next. There in the box was a Molly doll. She hadn’t realized how much she had missed her until she saw that doll again. As she gave him a hug, she mused how her child had just helped heal her inner child a bit with such a thoughtful present. Best gift ever, she thought.

Apart from being lovely stories, I share them because they reflect the wisdom of our readings. Take Galatians. It’s Paul’s nativity story. Not much of a story I admit but it is a nativity, as Paul writes that in the fullness of time Jesus was born of a woman. He doesn’t say anything else and doesn’t need to. Jesus was born of a woman, a reminder of what Christmas is about, God drawing near us in the Incarnation, born in Jesus like any of us and so fully human as well as fully divine. And because he was born like any of us, he was quite ordinary, even as people experienced God is and through him. Which brings us to the gospel, and one line that stuck out for me as Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple like any other parent would have done. Simeon said to Mary, “a sword will pierce your soul too.” The “too” suggests a sharing in what Jesus would experience. A sword would pierce him and her too. Mary was like any of us yet shared in him. Just like for us, the Incarnation manifested in our quite ordinary lives through our baptism, each of us joined to Jesus sharing his life. As Paul writes, we’ve been given his spirit so that as God’s adopted children we can cry to God, Abba, Father, like Jesus did.

And what did Simeon say of Jesus? He was to be a light to the nations. And we are to be that as well. Each story I shared was an example of just that. Ordinary people doing ordinary things, and yet through them they were a light, a way for God to draw near the world in a sharing of compassion, an offering of kindness, a thoughtful present that made a way for a heart to heal. So often we think we need to do extraordinary things, but we don’t. When we share with others, help in simple ways, are just human with each other, humane with each other, we extend Christ’s blessing into the world.

In nearly twelve hours we will ring in a new year, with all of its hope and potential. As we enter into it may we be a light to one another, in simple ways. As we do we share Christ’s life. Amen.