

“Love, Jesus”

Christmas is full of surprises, and a couple of weeks ago, I experienced a wonderful Christmas surprise in the form of an unexpected visit. A small group of Kindergartners from Washington Elementary School had made their way across the bustling boulevard that separates our campuses to bring Emmanuel good tidings of great joy in the form of hand-colored Christmas cards. As they walked into the Welcome Center, the students handed me their cards and proudly told me their names: Olivia, Alan, Natalie, Zl-air, Elana, Justin, Lily, Braylyn, and finally, Jesús.

Once all of the cards were delivered, the teachers began to herd the bundled-up brood back toward the door...that is until I asked them if they wanted to see a giant Christmas tree. The kids responded with a collective cheer that left their teachers no choice in the matter, so I began to shepherd the kids down the hallway as we made our way toward the sanctuary. When we entered the empty church, a few ESM teachers were preparing for Vespers rehearsal and one of them was standing near the Christmas tree. I asked him to plug in the tree on my signal, and then I slowly began the countdown. When the kids realized what I was doing they began to join in and together we counted, “five, four, three, two, one.” On my cue, Mr. Kuker plugged in the extension cord. The tree came to life, and the children gasped with glee as the glow from the tree lit up the entire room.

As they waddled through the west door to begin the walk back to Washington, I bid them farewell and then returned to my office and went back to whatever I was doing prior to the surprise visit. I moved through the rest day, and as things began to wind up, I noticed that the pile of ornament shaped Christmas cards was still sitting on the table in my office. I picked up the cards and began to read the truncated greetings and unpolished signatures of the children. They were very cute and heartwarmingly predictable, that is until I opened the final card. The front of the card featured a roughly-colored reindeer, surrounded by the predicable greeting, “Merry Christmas.” And when I opened the card, the signature inside simply read: “Love, Jesus.”

I must admit, this auspicious autograph caught me off guard, and I wasn’t quite sure what to make of it, but then I remembered that one of the children who came calling in the afternoon was a little boy named, “Jesús.” I shook my head, smiling at my oversight, and placed the Christmas card back on the stack. And yet, for the rest of the day, I couldn’t get little Jesús and his Christmas card out of my mind: “Merry Christmas. Love, Jesus.” And that is what this night is really all about.

And the angel said to them, “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:10-11). In a most unexpected and wonderful way, the angel’s surprise declaration pierced the night with the greatest Christmas greeting of all time and yet the phrase “good news” almost understates the enormity of the angel’s proclamation. You see, in the moment Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit and plunged creation into chaos, God had promised One who would crush the serpent’s head and redeem the human race, and for this deliverance God’s people had waited. From the preservation of Noah’s family, to God’s covenant with Abraham; in the Exodus from Egypt, and the Psalms of King David, across the centuries, and through the words of God’s prophets, the promise of a coming Savior had been repeated.

The Lord vowed to Abram, “All peoples on earth will be blessed through you” (Genesis 12:3). Jacob blessed his sons saying, “The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet until he comes to whom it belongs” (Genesis 49:10). Isaiah pointed to God’s promise when he wrote, “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given...and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). And in the words of the prophet Micah, God said, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah...out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times” (Micah 5:2).

Year by year, and bit by bit, like the pieces of a cosmic puzzle, the Old Testament formed a picture that pointed to this very moment in time and, as the angel made his announcement, the sky exploded with celebration as “a great company of the heavenly host appeared” praising God for remembering His promise; for keeping His word; and for sending His Christ to redeem creation (Luke 2:13-14).

This was indeed, “good news of great joy” and the shepherds’ reaction says it all as, “they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.” These simple shepherds had to see with their own eyes and confirm for themselves that what they had heard from the angel was really true. And when they had seen the baby who was the Christ, and when they had verified the good news spoken by the angel, what did they do? They proclaimed it! Luke writes, “When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them” (Luke 2:17-18). The shepherds heard good news and they shared it.

Tonight, you have also heard the good news of great joy about Jesus, and it has never been more important than it is right now! Because, you see, as hard as we work to make our holiday celebrations perfect, and as much as we want everything to be just right for our gatherings with family and friends...the truth is that sometimes, the people we love the most can’t be with us for Christmas. And sometimes, the call from the doctor’s office is not good news. And sometimes, the weight of unreconciled relationships is crushing. And at these times in our lives, the songs of celebration and Christmas cheer only seem to underscore the pain we feel inside.

And yet it is precisely here, in times like these, that the angel’s message to the shepherds is most meaningful. You see, tonight, God is reminding you that His love for you is personal; and that His love for you became flesh in the baby, Jesus; and tonight God is telling you that His love for you moved this Child to die in your place; and that His love for you raised Him to life for your salvation; and that in His love for you, God has in Christ, reconciled the world to Himself (II Corinthians 5:19)!

Tonight, my friends, I bring you the good tidings of great joy that because of this Child, who is the Christ, you are forgiven! And that in this Christ Child, you are accepted by God! And that through this Christ Child, you have eternal life! And now, my friends, you are proclaimers of the Gospel message of salvation in this holy Child. No matter what darkness has come, no matter how helpless you may feel, no matter how far you have fallen or lost you have been, this Christmas is merry and you can have hope, because the love of Jesus is for you. Go with the peace of this promise God has made to you tonight as you add your voice to the heavenly proclamation, Merry Christmas! *Merry Christmas!* Love, Jesus.

Pastor Thomas A. Eggold