

THINGS ARE LOOKING UP - Luke 2:8-20

In the classic Christmas film, “*A Charlie Brown Christmas*,” Charlie Brown says to Linus, “*I think there must be something wrong with me, Linus. Christmas is coming, but I'm not happy. I don't feel the way I'm supposed to feel. I just don't understand Christmas, I guess. I like getting presents and sending Christmas cards and decorating trees and all that, but I'm still not happy. I always end up feeling depressed.*”

We can sympathize with Charlie Brown’s dilemma. This little boy, who is prone to depressive feelings, speaks for a lot of people. Like Charlie Brown, we often don’t feel the way we are supposed to feel during this season of good tidings of great joy. Maybe we don’t quite understand Christmas either, and we, like Charlie Brown, end up feeling depressed too. We miss loved ones who are far away or who have died. We read about train wrecks, terrorists attacks, ethnic cleansing in Myanmar, troubling political developments in our own country. We worry about loved ones who struggle with addiction problems, or money problems, or relationship problems.

This past week, Patty and I have been emptying out our church office for the final time, as we prepare for our retirement. It feels a little eerie and disturbing now to step into our office that had once been so full of our things, filled with our papers and reference books, 30 years of sermons, and dreams, and creativity, and loving interactions with so many of you. But now, all physical evidence of that is gone, and our office feels sad and empty.

Life’s changes can make you feel that way sometimes. Life is often forcing changes upon us that we must adjust to – our bodies grow older, our circumstances change, our purpose in life keeps moving on to something else, our children grow up and leave home. Even the changes we plan for, that we look forward to, can have a sad and bitter side to them.

We feel these poignant things at Christmas time especially, I think, because, ironically, this is the season we start to entertain, even if so ever briefly, feelings of hope – hope that things might change for the better, hope that we might truly be happy, hope that our world would evolve, hope that humanity might have a breakthrough. But as soon as we start looking for hope, as soon as we start looking to reconnect with some loved ones who have been estranged for too long, as soon as we start looking for ways to bring our families a little closer together or help our church to grow, as soon as we start looking for signs in our world and nation that we are becoming a more

compassionate and just people, it is then that we ironically see with the greatest clarity how sad and discouraging our world really is.

And that is why Christmas is a sad time for many. Many just try to stay ahead of their feelings of depression, put on a smiley face, and just make the best of it. Charlie Brown does that by trying to see the bright side of being depressed. He says to his friend Patty: *“When you’re depressed, it makes a lot of difference how you stand. The worst thing you can do is straighten up and hold your head high, because then you start to feel better. If you’re going to get any joy out of being depressed, you’ve got to stand like this.”*

It is good for us to find humor in our trials, but in the end depression is no laughing matter. And there really isn’t a bright side to depression at all. In the end, it never feels good, and the relief we long for always eludes us somehow. In the gospel of Luke, we told that on the night of Jesus’ birth *“there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night.”* Life was hard for these shepherds. They were poor, and the Romans oppressed them by extracting heavy taxes from their meager wages. And the week that Jesus was born was an especially challenging time for these shepherds. There were a lot of strangers on the road because Rome required everyone to travel to their place of birth and register in their census. This is why Mary and Joseph were traveling to Bethlehem. With all these strangers in town, the shepherds had to be extra vigilant throughout the night to spot thieves in the shadows who were looking to steal a sheep for a free meal.

When you expect people to abuse you, your view on humanity inevitably turns sour and you become jaded and cynical. Perhaps the shepherds felt that way as they guarded their flocks from thieves, their eyes constantly scanning the bushes, fearful or resentful that at any moment they could get ripped off. Sounds unfair and depressing, doesn’t it? Sounds like shades of Charlie Brown!

But the scriptures declare that something happened to the shepherds that caused them to snap out of their dullness and look up. The scripture says, *“An angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them...the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid: for see – I am bringing you good new of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord... And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace...”*

The shepherds stopped looking down like Charlie Brown. They stopped looking down into their fears and resentments and burdens. Instead, they set their shoulders back, held their heads high, and really looked up. And they saw a whole new world opening to them. They saw the goodness of God working powerfully to bless them and guide them, which was something they were not aware of until that night. They saw how things were looking up for them, and for all of humanity! *“For to you is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

We all need to look up. We all need to be more receptive to what God is doing in our lives each day. We all need to hear the angels sing, and see how Christ has the power to start a whole new thing within us. No matter how empty or depressed we get, we need to know and have faith in this bigger picture that God is always leading us into the Light. We can count on that. This faith perspective needs to become the center of our lives. We need to be careful NOT to be absorbed by the shallow, negative, depressing news of this world. God is doing a new thing. We should celebrate that, be drawn into that, be ambassadors of that, just like the angels who opened the eyes of those weary Bethlehem shepherds.

Some years ago, a young woman named Rachel learned how she could express this deeper meaning of Christ’s birth while working the ticket counter for Southwest Airlines one Christmas Eve night. It had been long day. She was exhausted, coming down with a cold, and feeling sad and alone because her family and close friends were far away. Rachel explains, *“The airline terminal was practically empty when the sweetest-looking old man walked very slowly with a cane up to my counter. In the faintest voice, he told me that he had to go to New Orleans. I tried to explain to him that there were no more flights that night, and that he would have to fly in the morning. He seemed confused with no reservation, no ticket, and no idea who was meeting him at his destination.*

When I asked him if he could come back tomorrow, he replied that his ride had gone and he had no place to stay. He looked very frail, and when I asked him if he was all right, I saw that he was carrying his clothes in a plastic bag, and that his leg was wrapped in a bandage stained with blood. I asked how he hurt his leg, and he said that he had had heart bypass surgery recently in which an artery had been taken from his leg!

I really didn’t know what to do. I called for a wheelchair, and I told him we would get it all straightened out. I booked him on an early morning flight, and

then asked my supervisor if we could find a place for him to stay. She said yes, and obtained a hotel voucher for one free night, along with meal tickets. As the porter whisked him off, I patted the old man's arm and explained that everything had been taken care of. As he left he said, 'Thank you,' and bent his head down, and started to cry. I cried too. When I went back to thank my supervisor, she just smiled and said, 'I love stories like that. He is your Christmas Man.'

Instead of feeling depressed that she was alone at Christmas, instead of looking down the empty hallways of the airline terminal and feeling sorry for herself, instead of feeling pained by all the bad news blaring 24/7 over the terminal TVs, Rachel chose to look up that night, and see an elderly man who could use her kindness. She was his angel announcing to him, through her loving arrangements, good news of a great joy. When she looked up, she saw that God had given her a Christmas Man to take care of. And that is how Christ came to her that night, lifting her gaze that could see into a deeper and more beautiful world rising around her.

This is the meaning of Jesus' birth. That despite what is going on in the world around us, God's goodness is washing over us, healing us, comforting us, leading us through all our trials, through all the difficult changes that Life forces upon us. But it's easy to miss this when you are looking down like Charlie Brown.

Charlie Brown was right. It DOES matter how you choose to stand. You can hang your head, gaze only at your own fearful predictions of life's unfairness and sorrows, and keep yourself quite depressed. Or you can lift your head, like the shepherds did, and begin to see the angels sing. So look up. It's happening right now. See what God is planning for your life. Things are definitely looking up!