

The Thing You Wish Hadn't Happened

December 24, 2015

Luke 2:1-14, 2 Timothy 1:6-7

We have just heard the Christmas story, a story of two young, unlikely people having to travel a great distance and give birth to a baby in the darkness of a stable, surrounded by animals and by dust and by hay. We have just heard the Christmas story of people—of shepherds—singing and rejoicing and gathering together because this event is about a God who is present with us, present not simply up in the sky but in the dust and in the hay and in the labor pains, who is present in the dark night and in the glimmer of stars and in the human beings who come together and share life.

And we have just heard a final song from *A Christmas Carol*, which we've had the fun of seeing in song and acting each week during this Advent season.

This final song comes when Scrooge, who has had to remember hard moments from his past, moments of losing people he loved, moments of being alone, and who has seen scenes of joy and of sorrow happening around him in the present time if only he would let himself see.

This final song comes after he has seen not only these memories of the past and images of the present but also what could happen in the future to himself and to Tiny Tim, the son of one of his employees, if he doesn't open his heart, if he doesn't find a way to begin again.

We have just heard these two stories side by side. We have just sung songs and lit candles, and we will sing more songs and light more candles for these stories and the hope, peace, joy, and love that they represent.

Of course, it's easy to celebrate them in retrospect. We know how they end. We know that in spite of the hardships young Mary and Joseph experienced, God was using them to change the world. We know that in spite of the painful possibilities the Ghost of Christmas Future shows Scrooge, these possibilities inspire Scrooge to change himself and to therefore change the ending of the story from one of death and sadness to one of hope and the power of human connection.

We celebrate them in retrospect. In the moment, it's not always so easy. In fact, so often in the course of our lives, it's very, very hard to trust that God is there and that God can bring light into darkness.

Stephen Colbert was ten years old when he lost his dad and two of his brothers in plane crash. He spent the years afterward not doing well in school and barely graduating from high school even though he read book after book on his own. Yet after recounting this most painful experience, Colbert, who is not only a comic genius but also a theological one, remarks that over time he grew to be able to say: "I love the thing I most wish had not happened."

It's a theological statement, a statement of faith in something that cannot be seen. "I love the thing I most wish had not happened."

How does that happen? How could he possibly say he loves an experience of such wrenching grief and heartbreak?

I don't know. He is clear that he never stopped wishing it didn't happen. He is also clear that his life has been a long holding together of gratitude and grief... a mix of things which our stories tonight also have something to say about. Our stories have something to say about wishing and reality, about grief and grace.

Perhaps the Crachits wished Tiny Tim had been born different, been born without the disability that made his life and theirs such a challenge on an everyday basis.

Perhaps Scrooge wished that he hadn't experienced the loneliness he knew as a boy or the loss of his sister and his fiancée that hardened him inside. Perhaps Scrooge wished that he didn't have to be visited by memories of Christmas past, by awareness of what is going on around him on his present Christmas, or by apparitions of what will be in Christmas future if he doesn't change. Perhaps at one time Scrooge wished that he didn't know about the hardship his employee Bob Crachit and his family were experiencing in that moment.

And perhaps at some point in the story, Mary wished that she didn't have to be a pregnant unmarried girl. Perhaps at one time Joseph wished that he weren't engaged to a girl pregnant with a child that he knew wasn't his. Perhaps they both wished they didn't have to travel for the census at the same time the baby was due, and perhaps they wished that there was a room for them in the inn.

But thank God Tiny Tim was born the way he was, and thank God he and his family were blessed by the depth of their connection and love, and thank God that their connection and love touched even the heart of the closed up Scrooge.

And thank God that Scrooge knew loneliness and loss and that even though they first caused him to close up inside, they also turn out to be a path that allows him, ultimately, to connect with other suffering people and make a difference in their lives. Thank God that Scrooge was visited by the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present, and Future, and thank God that he has to face up to who he has been so that he can become someone he wants to be.

And thank God that Mary was a pregnant unmarried teenager, an unlikely woman who God knew had it in her to bear the light of the world. Thank God Joseph had the courage to be up for the task of traveling the journey with her. Thank God they somehow trusted the course of things enough to end up giving birth in an unlikely, humble place to show the world what God's heart looks like, to show the world that God uses things we wished hadn't happened to somehow, against our understanding and imagination, to transform and to heal and to deepen us in order that we might give birth to things that may have seemed impossible before.

Thank God for moments when the thing we most wish hadn't happened becomes something that guides us through darkness into an untrimmable, unlimitable light. Thank God when it becomes part of the gift that is within us, to borrow the phrase from Timothy's letter that we heard earlier. Thank God when that thing gives us the very thing we need to begin again, to move forward not in fear but in hope.

It's not that happens right away or that we get to some magical moment when we stop wishing that thing didn't happen— we might never stop wishing it didn't happen— but that the Christmas story is about how somehow with time and with grace that comes from beyond us,

a path can open through it to a love we didn't know could be hiding there, to a light that we didn't know could be present in the midst of darkness, to a gift that doesn't undo suffering but gives strength and sometimes even joy through it.

That's the love and the gift and the light we celebrate this evening.
That's the love and the gift and the light we sing for and pray for and welcome into our hearts.
That's the love and the gift and the light we are asked to carry out with us into our families, our lives, our world.
Thank God!