

" When the News Really Is Good News "

Isaiah 11:1-6; Matthew 3:1-11

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

December 4, 2016 – 2nd Sunday in Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

When we think of Christmas we so often think of children. Their anticipation, their enthusiasm, their joy are all very much a part of the holiday season. And why shouldn't we think of them? After all the event we celebrate in this sacred season is the birth of a child. So it's natural that our own children come to mind.

Kids love this time of the year. Partly it's the excitement of giving and receiving presents. But it's also the colorful decorations, the tasty cakes and cookies, the gathering of the family before a crackling fire. Perhaps more than anything, it's the wonderful stories associated with Christmas that makes it seem magical.

Children celebrate Christmas, but they also seem to get a bit confused with it. They understand its basic idea, but they often mix up some of its specifics.

Like little Johnny. He was given a part in the church Christmas program. Not a big part, but an important one. He had just one line, but it was the angelic announcement of the birth of Jesus: "Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." This was his first time to have a speaking part, so Johnny worked very hard at learning his line. He probably recited his part at least a hundred times in anticipation of the big day.

Christmas Sunday finally came and the church was full. The children were all in their costumes and they were filled with excitement as they took their places at the front of the sanctuary. The program got underway and, one by one, the children stepped forward to recite their parts in the nativity story. Then it was Johnny's turn. It was time for the heavenly announcement.

Johnny went in front, took a deep breath, looked out at all the people, | and nothing came out of his mouth. His teacher was frantically trying to mouth the words, but to no avail. The congregation waited and prayed he would remember his line. Then, after what seemed like an eternity, Johnny's face suddenly brightened, and he belted out, "Boy, do I have some good news for you!" Not exactly the King James version.

Some 2000 years ago another John said much the same thing. John | the Baptist announced, "The kingdom of God is at hand." Then he went on to add that "he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and whose sandals I am not worthy to carry."

John's announcement echoes the prophecy found in Isaiah, the prediction of one who would come and change the course of history. "The spirit of the Lord," Isaiah said, "shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."

"And here in the man known as Jesus," John proclaimed, "is the one for whom the prophesy was written. Open your eyes and see him for the glorious one he is. This indeed is God's Chosen. If you look to him, you'll never be the same again. Your life will take on a new dimension; it will have new meaning. This is the Christ who had been foretold. This is the Savior of humanity."

In a world so troubled as that in which John lived these must have seemed like startling words. People must have wanted to believe him, but their skepticism also held them back. Some listened to John but, for the most, his announcement fell on deaf ears. The good news went largely unheeded. For many even today, the announcement has yet to be heard, though the words have been said over and over.

Christmas is a season of stories. Last week I told the tale of a cowboy who starts out on a trip with one thing in mind, but discovers something else quite different along the way. Through his experience he came to find a new understanding of Christmas, one that touched him directly. Today I want to share another story. It's called "The Midnight Visitors."

Frank is no longer a young man; in fact, he's been retired for some years. He and Ruthann live not far from the coast of Maine. It gets downright cold up there. That's how it was just before Christmas one year. The wind began to pick up mid-day, the temperature was dropping steadily, and the snow began to fall—first in gentle flakes, then in moderate amounts, and finally in sheets of white that were fast accumulating. Then the wind began to howl, and Frank knew that this was the start of a blizzard long before he heard the forecast on the radio. He knew the signs.

Ruthann liked to listen to her daytime 'stories' as she called them on the console radio in their living room. There was "Myrt and Marge" and "Pepper Young's Family," the Kate Smith show, then the news at noon. Frank paid little attention but his ears perked up when the local announcer mentioned that word "blizzard."

"I told you something was comin'."

"So you did, Frank," replied Ruthann. "So you did."

By the time the radio presented "The Romance of Helen Trent," "Our Gal Sunday," and "Backstage Wife" the storm had arrived in full force. Still there wasn't anything to do about it, so the couple stayed inside and were glad to be in the comfortable shelter of their home. What light there was to the gray day before the snow now gave way to almost complete darkness by four o'clock. Ruthann turned the radio off for a while and it would stay off until Frank turned it on again for "The Goldbergs." They listened to that together while she fixed supper each evening.

In that quiet period of late afternoon, Ruthann looked up from her knitting and watched Frank tinkering with a small motor of some kind. "Frank, I wished you'd come with me to church this year," she said.

"Now Honey you know what I'm going to say. It's what I always say, always have. You knew I wasn't the religious type when we got married fifty years ago. And I told you the truth. Still I'm

pleased when you go. I know it makes you happy to be part of a church. I'll take you and pick you up, just don't expect something that's not going to happen."

"Just thought I'd try," replied Ruthann. "I try every year about this time. Thought I might have worn you down or you might have second thoughts. And I do appreciate your driving me to and from, yet I wish you'd go in with me some time. You're a good man, Frank Lester. Think how much better yet you might be."

"I shudder to think," he said with a twinkle in his eye. And this conversation, as usual, was dropped for another season. A nice supper warmed the couple against the raw elements outdoors and, afterwards, they sat sipping coffee while the world was being covered in a blanket of white. Frank enjoyed Lowell Thomas' commentary on the day's events, although the news of the world left one rather unsettled. Later they heard the latest installment of "Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons," then Fred Waring.

Ruthann usually turned in about then, but Frank stayed up somewhat later. He said that this was his "thinkin' time," when he resolved the problems of the day and planned for tomorrow. Actually tonight he just didn't feel like going to bed. The storm was tapering off, but it left an unsettled feeling in him. He didn't know what it was, but it came on him from time to time.

Near midnight he was still awake and sitting in his favorite armchair. Suddenly he heard a thump on the window pane near the table lamp. Frank got up quickly and pulled the curtain back. He could see that a small flock of birds had been attracted to the light, perhaps as a vain attempt to keep warm and survive on this sub-zero night. As they fluttered in the deep snow, their wings began to freeze. They looked so miserable.

Frank put on his overshoes and heavy woolen coat and went to the door. He thought to himself, "I must do something for these helpless little creatures. I can't bring them into the house. Besides they'd be too frightened." Then he looked toward the barn across the driveway. Taking his lantern in hand, he walked across the snow and swung open the door.

He coaxed them in the gentlest voice he could muster: "It's not much, but at least you can get in out of the wind." Frank then circled behind the birds and tried to shoo them toward shelter, but they scattered across the barnyard in confusion. "Come, I'm not going to hurt you. If only you could understand that I'm not going to hurt you. I'm pointing to what will save you. Don't be afraid. This is good news I've got for you."

Then suddenly he thought of the buildup toward war in Europe. "It's no different than these birds. The world is scared, but they can't heed those who are trying to point them to safety. They're going headlong into conflict and can't see the road to peace."

Suddenly a shudder went through Frank that was more than the outside cold. "Maybe I'm one of those birds. Maybe I've missed what Ruthann and others have been trying to tell me all these years. Maybe I have been a stubborn old fool. Maybe only now I'm beginning to understand."

That night he tried to bring a flock of frightened and dying birds the message that would save them, but in them he began to see himself. They didn't know good news when it was given them, nor had he all these years. What he couldn't do for them, he decided he now needed to act on himself. Near his own stable, he found the true stable. That year in the aftermath of a blizzard a man named Frank Lester celebrated his very *first* Christmas.