

Dec. 23, 2018

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 2: 1-20

Prayer: Dear Lord, in this season of short days and long nights, we sense the turning — of the calendar, of the light. Help us turn toward the light, let it warm and brighten our lives. In the name you wore when you came as light into the world, Amen.

Cancelling Christmas

Four years ago, Utah parents Lisa and John Henderson made national headlines when they cancelled Christmas.

Their three boys – 11, 8 and 5 years old at the time – had acted up a lot that year. They fought. They were disrespectful. They were ungrateful. Worst of all, according to their parents, they acted entitled.

Lisa and John put them in time out. They talked and talked and talked to the boys. But their behavior didn't change. And so they pulled out the big gun: Santa wouldn't come that year.

No stockings. No reindeer paws. No presents.

Lisa blogged about it, and the family was overwhelmed by attention. CNN, ABC News, radio shows. Everyone was intrigued that two parents actually followed through on the threat that we all make.

Some people thought Lisa and John were wrong. A comment on Lisa's blog called her "mean" and "lazy."

Others backed her up. An elementary school teacher wrote, “Please believe me when I say what you did is a blessing for them, and will continue to help them through their lives.”

I sided with the teacher – and with Lisa and John. You go, parents! They knew their children better than anyone, and they knew what was right – and what was needed.

The only thing I felt bad about was that I suspected it was the 11-year-old and 8-year-old driving that train. The 5-year-old was probably standing around going, “What happened?”

So what the Henderson family did in 2014 instead of hosting Santa, was to observe the important part of Christmas. They decorated. They shopped and gave to people in the community. They invited some isolated people in to share Christmas dinner.

In other words, they celebrated the birth of Jesus ... *by following the teachings of Jesus.*

And a pretty amazing thing happened. It started with 5-year-old Beckham. About a week before Christmas, the littlest Henderson started wrapping things up and putting them under the tree. Pictures he’d drawn, small toys, occasionally things he rescued from the trash. Soon he’d gone through a whole roll of wrapping paper.

His brothers saw the awkwardly wrapped packages he placed under the tree and wanted to join in. Every time Lisa entered a room, she’d find evidence that the Scotch tape and wrapping paper had been out again.

On Christmas Eve, the boys set out cookies for Santa and carrots for the reindeer. Lisa and John reminded them that Santa wasn’t bringing presents, and they said that was all right. They still wanted him to have his snack.

In the morning, each boy found just two pieces of candy and a special letter from Santa. But they were most excited about opening their presents to each other. And that, said Lisa, was when the magic happened.

It turned out that the boys had not wrapped up small meaningless toys they didn't want. They had given each other the best of what they had. Shades of O. Henry.

They gave the things that mattered most to them. And being brothers, each recipient *knew* how much the giver valued the gift.

There were exceptions, of course Five-year-old Beckham gave one brother a burned out light bulb his mother had thrown away. But the older brother held it above his head and said, "Look, Beckham gave me a prop because I have so many good ideas!"

John and Lisa hadn't cancelled Christmas at all.

They had't stopped Christmas from coming! It came!

Somehow or other, it came just the same!

As Lisa was trying to make sense of it later, she decided that even though the experiment started for a negative reason – the boys' behavior – it grew into a sincere desire to make the holiday more meaningful. Cancelling Christmas out of anger, she said, probably wouldn't have worked.

Here's what she wrote: "We sought to teach our kids a lesson about giving and kindness, and in the end, it was them who taught us. They faced what so many kids would have seen as the worst Christmas ever and turned it into the best Christmas for themselves and

certainly for us as their parents. It is no wonder that the Savior wanted us to be like little children.”

If you'd like to get back to basics this morning, join me in reading the story of the original Christmas from the gospel of Luke. **Luke 2: 1-20.**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered.

Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will

be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'

¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.'

¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.

¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

With our selection of music this morning, you may think *we* decided to cancel Christmas. But like the Hendersons, we are celebrating the birth of Jesus ... by espousing the teachings of Jesus.

You can lean on me, Brother, I can see you've carried too long.... You can lean on me, Sister. You can lean on me, Stranger.

“Everlasting Arms” came from a Playing for Change video. If you have watched any of these, they are delightful examples of musicians from all over the world uniting in a single song.

Luke Winslow King, a New Orleans-based musician, wrote “Everlasting Arms.” The video includes Dr. John, Vasti Jackson and the Roots Gospel Voices of Mississippi, brass players from California, as well as musicians in Italy, Argentina, Anguilla (An Gwilla) and Dominica.

It’s a beautiful picture – even a theological picture – of global interaction, of caring about each other across national borders.

We’re leaning, leaning, leaning on the everlasting arms.

So what we are trying to do this morning is refuse to let the manger define our Savior. We’re following the Christmas story to its conclusion. As Taylor sang,

The end of the world is coming, so you better get on your knees

Bottle rockets are two for one but salvation's free.

The underside of the Hendersons’ experiment – the part that would probably keep them from doing it again, or at least from announcing it again – was the notoriety they received. In the age of Internet posts and comments, they felt their sons were unfairly targeted.

But to me, their experiment followed the storyline of a narrative we read in here almost every Christmas, a narrative that expresses the Christmas story almost as well as Luke does.

How the Grinch Stole Christmas.

Dr. Seuss wrote his book in 1957, but somehow I missed it as a little girl. I came to know the Grinch when I had children of my own. We'd read it every night from Thanksgiving to Christmas.

That was enough for the girls. But Taylor couldn't get enough of it. He was captivated by the cartoon version and stood on the end of the couch watching it over and over and over, at least once a day, sometimes more.

And not only during the Christmas season. We taped it for him, and so he watched every day from Thanksgiving through April.

He never got tired of it. And I have to admit: I never got tired of it. The Whos down in Whoville, as you undoubtedly know, liked Christmas a lot. But the Grinch, who lived just north of Whoville, did not.

The Grinch hated Christmas — the whole Christmas season.

Oh, please don't ask why,

no one quite knows the reason.

It could be, perhaps, that his shoes were too tight.

Or maybe his head wasn't screwed on just right.

But I think that the most likely reason of all

May have been that his heart was two sizes too small.

Eager to make everyone else as miserable as he was, the Grinch dressed his poor dog Max to look like a reindeer, hitched him to a sleigh and raced into Whoville. He stole all the

Whos' presents, ornaments, Christmas trees, tinsel, feasts -- *every single thing* they had to celebrate Christmas.

Then he paused in wicked anticipation to hear all their boo-hooing.

But it didn't come. Instead, he heard the Whos singing joyously of Christmas.

And the Grinch, with his grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,

Stood puzzling and puzzling: "How could it be so?

It came without ribbons! It came without tags!

It came without packages, boxes or bags!"

And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.

Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!

"Maybe Christmas," he thought, "doesn't come from a store.

Maybe Christmas... perhaps... means a little bit more!"

Dr. Seuss nailed the meaning of Christmas – without ever mentioning the name of Jesus. When he then writes that the Grinch's heart grew three sizes that day, we might interpret it, **"For God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son...."**

This ending was precisely what John and Lisa Henderson hoped for during their Christmas of 2014. And they got it. Their boys learned that "maybe Christmas doesn't come from a store, that Christmas, perhaps, means a little bit more."

As both the Hendersons and the Grinch discovered, you can't really cancel Christmas. But you can cancel the excess, the commercialism, the self-absorption, the ugly side of it.

As we go into Christmas week, let's take into it the teachings that the baby in the manger espoused when he grew up: Love of our neighbor. Care for the poor. Welcome of the alien.

Down near the Mexican border, our Christian brothers and sisters are marking this week with a twist on a custom popular in Latin American countries. *Las Posadas* is Spanish for "inn" or "shelter." In many Latino countries, a couple representing Joseph and Mary walk – or ride a donkey -- from house to house seeking shelter.

They stop at each house and Joseph sings:

*In the name of heaven
I ask you for shelter,
for my beloved wife
can go no farther.*

And the people in the house answer:

This is not an inn.

Get on with you,

*I cannot open the door,
you might be a rogue.*

(It sounds more poetic in Spanish).

Only at the very end of the journey is there a designated house that allows Mary and Joseph and all the townspeople to come in. There's a party because the holy family has found their welcome.

Clearly, there's more symbolism to this custom than simple remembrance of what the holy family faced 2,000 years ago. This year, we know that thousands of people are facing that very same un-welcome.

So some faith leaders have adapted *Las Posadas* into *La Posada Sin Fronteras*: Shelter Without Borders. Immigration advocates on the Mexican side of the border play Mary and Joseph and sing:

, *Don't be inhuman;*
 have mercy on us
 God in heaven
 will reward you.

And the “innkeepers” on the States side of the border sing:

You can go now
 and don't bother me
 because if I become angry
. *I'm going to beat you up.*

It's hard to romanticize the baby in the manger in the midst of threatened assault to his parents.

Let us spend this Christmas committed to what that baby grew up and taught. Love of neighbor. Care for the poor. Welcome of the alien.

Percy is going to sing for us the old spiritual “Amen.” As you will hear, the baby is in the manger for only one verse.

For the rest of the song, he is out living among us.

Amen. Amen. Amen.

