

Rejoice in God's Love

Matthew 2, Selections; Luke 2, Selections

Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green
Christmas Eve, 2012

I already didn't get what I wanted for Christmas. I didn't get what I wanted last year, either. Now, before you come to the conclusion that my husband is a cheapskate, let me tell you what it is that I have been wanting.

Every year on Christmas Eve, a Festival of Lessons and Carols is broadcast live around the world from Kings College Chapel in London. The service always begins with the children's carol, "Once in Royal David's City," and the opening verse is always sung by an eleven or twelve year old boy soprano, as a solo.

The boy who sings the solo won't find out he's been chosen to sing it until just before the opening processional, just minutes before the music will be broadcast—live—all around the world! They do it this way so the boy who is chosen for the solo won't have time to get nervous!

As the choirboys are lining up, one of them is tapped on the shoulder. "You're it," an adult whispers to him, and in he walks with the other choristers. The conductor points to the chosen boy, who takes a breath, and the broadcast begins. Live. Around the world.

What I have been wanting for Christmas is simply to watch the opening minutes of that service, live, on television. I have been wanting see that boy and hear him sing, live. Don't tell me I can watch the rebroadcast on Christmas Day. I already know that. What *I want* is to be present with that boy in the moment, and receive his gift of music, *in the moment*.

Last year I planned my whole entire day around the live broadcast, which comes on in this area at 10:00AM. Naturally, at exactly 9:55AM, the phone rang, an important call, and by the time I extracted myself and rushed back into the living room, the choir was just wrapping up the last verse. I missed the live broadcast again today for other mundane reasons that I won't bore you with.

The point is, I didn't get what I wanted. I didn't get the "perfect" experience of Christmas the way I imagined it. And I expect you won't either.

No, Christmas 2012 won't be exactly as you would like it to be. Not everything will go the way it "should" (according to you). Certain people will be annoying, maybe even you. There will in all likelihood be at least one kitchen-related disaster. And someone will be missing—someone who used to always be there—and you will want and miss that person.

Actual Christmas is always that way. And that is, actually, a good thing. *Not* getting what we want has the advantage of turning our attention away from our *ideas about* Christmas to the *thing itself*.

I had this idea that I *had* to hear the King's College choirboy solo, but I didn't, and guess what? It's still Christmas. Nothing was ruined. My disappointment forces me to shake myself loose from my idea of how it should be and just let that go.

Christmas isn't about what I want. It's about what God gives.

In the words of Christian Rosetti:

*Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine;
Love was born at Christmas;
Star and angels gave the sign.*

Although what we want might be perfectly good, wholesome and perfectly harmless, we are always in danger of letting our good wants displace the mighty miracle itself.

*Worship we the Godhead,
Love Incarnate, Love Divine;
Worship we our Jesus,
But wherewith for sacred sign?*

*Love shall be our token,
Love be yours and love be mine,
Love to God and all men,
Love for plea and gift and sign.¹*

Love, the mighty miracle, is what God gives on this holy night—love of a depth and quality and vulnerability and scandal that the world has never seen before. In a lowly manger lies the baby who will grow up to say, "Father forgive them, they know not what they do."

In the undignified conditions of a cowshed lies the infant king—the King of Kings, who will forego throne, crown and army, who will rule without an iron fist, and reign without coercion. The mighty miracle of the manger *is Christmas*. No more. No less. God's love swaddled in human form. God's love unguarded.

To say that love came down at Christmas has become something of cliché. How that ever happened I can't imagine. In his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, the author Frederick Buechner writes the clearest and most powerful description of God's love that I know of, and there's nothing cliché about it.

There are, says Buechner, four kinds of love. The first he calls the love for equals.

The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend, brother for brother. It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles.

This, by the way, is the sort of love you and I think of during the holidays, the love of family for family. It is good but not remarkable.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world.

You, Bloomfield Presbyterian Church on the Green, are good at this kind of love. You go beyond wringing your hands in despair about human suffering and you actually do something instead: through the Food Pantry, the CROP walk, the Thrift Shop, your monthly community meals & mission giving, you show compassion-in-action. You live the “true meaning of Christmas” even when it’s not Christmas.

The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing, says Buechner, and I agree. But he goes on:

The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice, the love of the poor for the rich, of the black man for the white man. The world is always bewildered by its saints.

And then, writes Buechner,

...there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain. The tortured’s love for the torturer. This is God’s love. It conquers the world.²

God’s love came down at Christmas. In the birth of Jesus, in his life and death and resurrection, God loved a world that did not love in return. Jesus, who was tortured on the cross, loved his torturers. Jesus, who was mocked and beaten and executed on false charges, loved in return.

This is God’s love. It conquers the world. And it is not a thing of the past. It is now and it is new again, here tonight.

The mighty miracle of the manger isn’t about family loving family, although that is a good thing. It isn’t about charitable giving, although that is necessary. It isn’t even about the extraordinary acts of service that we associate with saintly people

like Mother Teresa, although such people are inspiring role models. *The mighty miracle of the manger is about God's deep and abiding love for a world that does not love in return.*

It is insulting to Jesus that he lies in a manger bed, but this foreshadows the insults and betrayals to come. In Jesus Christ God loved the world so much that God transformed the ultimate insult into the ultimate victory.

Jesus, whom we welcome this night into the manger beds of our nativity scenes and into every available corner of our hearts is God-with-us, God, whose love conquers the world and all evil.

My brothers and sisters in Christ, by the time you leave here this evening, your celebration of Christmas will be complete. Everything else will be extra.

The mighty miracle of the manger is now, and is for you.

To the glory of God. Amen.

~Rev. Ruth L. Boling

¹. Christina Rossetti, originally published in *Time Flies: A Reading Diary*, 1885.

². Frederick Buechner, *The Magnificent Defeat*, HarperSanFrancisco, 1985.