

CHRISTMAS EVE, YEAR B, DECEMBER 24, 2020

I like to tell you a story this evening. It's about a bike shop in a small town that was constantly busy, especially in the run-up to Christmas. They not only sold new and used bikes but repaired bikes as well. Right after Thanksgiving, a young boy wandered in, who was poorly dressed and obviously from a struggling family. The staff, at first, was a bit worried about shoplifting but it soon became clear that the child was harmless enough. He would just come in, look closely one at a time at all the new bikes that were being brought in for the Christmas sales, and then stand out of the way in the corner of the room and watch the men work. Whole afternoons would pass this way: the staff wheeling old and new bikes in and out, fixing, joking, having coffee, laughing, working - all the while the young boy watching silently and intently. And then, without warning, the child would just walk out and go to wherever he was from. But the next day he'd always be back.

This went on for about two weeks. He seemed to spend more and more time watching the repair part of the shop. And then, one day, after a large group of customers had just left, the young child made a beeline over to where some of the men were working. He laid a rusty old bolt on the counter in front of them.

'Excuse me,' he said politely, 'would you be able to put a new bike on this bolt?'

The men laughed. It took a child to want a bike put on a bolt instead of a bolt put on a bike! They hadn't realized how young the boy was. Clearly he hadn't yet grasped the concept about how bikes were built. He was still at the stage where he believed that because a bus takes you to school; ALL busses must go to your school.

Their laughter, even though it was not intended to be mean, stung the boy. He didn't understand the laughter, but he knew something he had said must be wrong. He backed away, looking at them and the men caught themselves and immediately felt bad. But by that time he was gone like a flash. The men ran outside after him wanting to apologize but the boy had disappeared.

A week before Christmas, with as little explanation as always, he was back. This time, however, he was even more reluctant to make contact with anyone at the store. He looked carefully at every new bike on display, as always, carefully scrutinizing each in turn. But this time he kept his head down whenever anyone else came near. Then like he had never left, he took up his accustomed place at the wall of the repair area. But now his head was down, as if he were embarrassed, or had done something wrong, and he kept fingering the hole in his pants.

Then the day before Christmas as the boy stood in his usual spot, one of the men repairing bikes called to him: 'hey kid!' He looked up. The men and women who staffed the store were all there. The man said, 'You forgot your bolt,'

And with that one of the staff wheeled out and presented to the child a bicycle, brand-new but made entirely out of scrap parts that the store workers had salvaged on their own time in the last week.

Sometimes, says the Christmas Gospel, all it takes is a bolt. All it takes is a bolt to build something wonderful and useful. There was nothing fancy about the story that Luke tells us in his gospel; nothing in fact, says Luke, but desperate poverty. But God fashioned a miracle out of it just the same.

Our world of late has been filled with a lot of pain and sorrow. There are those who have been battered by Covid and are still trying to recover or have lost loved ones

to the virus. There has been an incredible number of hurricanes and fires and people devastated by these natural disasters wondering if they will ever be able to rebuild. Many small businesses are closing, people are being laid off and many are holding off evictions and they too wonder if life will ever get better. So often we get caught up in all the horrific things happening today that we forget how bad the world has been even in the past. We fail to recognize that Jesus was also born into a world of disasters and violence. That he didn't come to be 'gentle Jesus meek and mild. Jesus, himself experienced stress and strain and struggle, but even in the midst of that, he had hope.

So, the story, we celebrate tonight is ultimately of the Messiah born into nothing but fear and refugee status. Luke deliberately fashions his story about Jesus' birth to emphasize those who are outcast and downcast and those who live on the fringe of society. Jesus is born like a transient dumped off at the outskirts of town. The stable, Luke writes about, would have been out in the back, with the smell and the sound and the breath of the animals steaming in the cold night air. Jesus was born into the muck and mire of this world just like we are experiencing now. That is the stark reality Luke portrays not this romanticized version we have come to perpetuate of a peaceful, serene scene. And underneath all of this, Luke asks us every Christmas do we have that rusty bolt given in innocence and trust that something can be done with it. Are we holding out that rusty bolt to God asking for something wonderful to be created out of it which can give us the peace and joy we long for?

A year ago none of us could have ever imagined that this Christmas we would not be able to be together, to break bread together and pass the peace. For many of us we will spend Christmas alone. I am reminded of that Christmas movie classic, "Home Alone" where the young 8 year old boy, Kevin, is mistakenly left home alone. Despite all the antics of that movie, the part that is endearing to me is how he decides to recreate Christmas as he knows it. He hangs stockings and decorates a tree to produce some normalcy to an untenable situation.

It's hard when we feel that we can't celebrate Christmas the way we always have. It's hard not being with extended family. However, in the same way that Kevin figured out what to do, we too need to make Christmas not about what we're missing or who we can't be with but what we do have. We need to recognize, especially this year, that Christmas is about God putting God's promise of life and love onto the reclaimed parts of our disappointments, our worries, our stresses and giving our lives right back to us useable again – like building a new bike out of scraps. Christmas is building something new out of the mourning and grieving we are experiencing. It is also about love coming to us in the most open of all ways - like a baby. Love - especially God's love - is love that comes to us without any sophistication or demands, but just is.

Christmas celebrates the coming of God in Jesus so that we may know how to love. It is a reminder that Jesus came to change and save the world and that he would not only defend the widows and children, stand up to religious hypocrisy, break down man-made barriers, challenge the status quo of the powerful, but also bring us the hope and peace that we long for.

So, to truly celebrate Christmas this year we need to remember and act like we are the body of Christ and beloved. Because when we do we can recognize the essence of Luke's nativity: it is a miracle of creating something from nothing, creating a bike from a bolt, hope where there was none, building the beginnings of a whole new world out of

the back of a stable. No matter what we bring to this evening, no matter what kind of disappointments, hurts, memories, weaknesses, fears and failings, there is enough of God's love to build out of them something wonderful.

Just like the boy in the story asking for a bike to be put on a bolt instead of a bolt on a bike, Christmas is a chance to rebuild our lives, not just a patching over, but a reconstruction.

This Christmas may we can create something new for ourselves and others out of all the rusty bolts of our lives. May the light of Jesus bring new life into this world and may it shine brightly forever in you. Amen.