

Yr. C, Christmas 2
January 2, 2022
Preached by the Rev. Furman Buchanan
St. Peter's Episcopal Church
1509 Words

Lessons: Jeremiah 31:7-14
Psalm 84
Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a
Matthew 2:1-12

The Story of Christmas is a story of tremendous risk and hardship. There is joy in it, for sure; but the heart of the Christmas Story beats in the midst of hardship and risk.

The truth is that Mary's fragile life—and the life of her son—depended upon the absolute mercy of Joseph. Thank God he was a dreamer—more prone to being imaginative than to being reasonable. Joseph was also just a *good* person—erring on the side of mercy, not consequences.

Otherwise, Mary would've been stoned to death up in Nazareth on account of her inexplicable pregnancy. If she was lucky—he might have just quietly dismissed her into an anonymous life as someone's slave.

Those mysterious gentiles from the East may already have been on their way—heavy laden with treasure chests and following a star as Joseph looked to those same heavens for answers about what *he* should do. Should he tend to *his* future or to Mary's future? Should Joseph prioritize his own honor or go out on a limb to protect her honor?

Joseph was betrothed to her, but not yet married, so he was not obligated in any sense to take on the burdens of Mary and the baby. Joseph was just dreaming about saying “yes”...to God...to Mary...and to the child.

Meanwhile, those wealthy Magi are on the road to Judea, eager to see the newborn king of the Jews. They're like us, it seems—they have the *easy part*—come and worship...just come and worship Christ, the newborn king!

It's Joseph who has to figure out what to do next—not just for a Sabbath or a Sunday morning or even a fortnight, but *for good*. It's Joseph who will have to pick up his life and flee to Egypt! It's Joseph who will have to scrounge for work as a refugee and a foreigner.

There's a Hebrew word used to describe someone merciful like Joseph. More than a thousand years earlier *in that same little town* of Bethlehem, this Hebrew word was used to describe a man named Boaz. You remember Boaz, right? He's the guy who took care of the helpless, hopeless young woman named Ruth.

She was a young gentile widow who was so loyal to her Jewish mother-in-law that she followed her on a search for food during a time of famine. It was a *dead end road*, and she knew it!

Ruth became famous, you know. She is listed as one of three gentile women who are part of the ancestry of Jesus. Ruth was the great grandmother of David—the *first* great King of the Jews (who was also born in Bethlehem.)

The young woman, Ruth, and the young woman, Mary, were separated by more than a thousand years, but they also had something in common. They were both out of choices. They were stuck, facing the *certainty* of poverty or slavery or worse. They both needed a miraculous, new beginning...a fresh start...a clean slate.

For Ruth, the person who gave her a new chance was Boaz. For Mary, the person who gave her a new beginning was Joseph. And the Hebrew word used to describe heroes like Boaz and Joseph is a word you already know—'redeemer.'¹

¹ The expansive meaning of the words, 'redeem' and 'redeemer' are drawn from Matthew Richard Schlimm, *70 Hebrew Words Every Christian Should Know*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2018), p. 88-91.

We've turned that word into a title for Jesus, but it's an actual word also attributed to *actual people* who step up in the midst of someone else's overwhelming need, and say, "I've got you covered. I've got your back. Whatever it costs, *I'll pay it*. Whatever you need in order to have a fresh start and a clean slate, *I'll do it*."

A redeemer is a channel of the ever-flowing grace and mercy of God. They choose to do what they do, not out of self-interest or for self-promotion. They do it for love...they do it for God.

You see, this is *how* the love of God works. It is channeled through *real people*. And it is God's will for all those channels—all those streams of grace and mercy—to converge together and form a deep, inexhaustible reservoir of freedom and peace which makes life not only *possible*...not just *bearable*, but truly blessed. As Jeremiah wrote in our Old Testament lesson, "a life that becomes like a *watered garden*."

Well, one dark night, the Magi finally arrived in Bethlehem—perfect strangers from a distant land who simply came to worship Christ, the newborn king. They opened their treasure chests and lavished Jesus, Joseph, and Mary with valuable gifts. They did not do it out of self-interest or for self-promotion. They did it for love. They did it for God.

And *those* incredible gifts *redeemed* the Holy Family. Those gentile gifts made it possible for Joseph, Mary, and Jesus to escape from evil King Herod.

When there were no choices left to protect the newborn King of the Jews, that poor family needed a miraculous, new beginning...a fresh start...a clean slate. The Magi became the unlikely 'little r' redeemers who saved the life of our 'big r' Redeemer from certain death.

One of the great privileges of being a priest in this Church is getting to see actual, real-life people who choose to become redeemers for other people who need fresh starts, new beginnings or clean slates. Oftentimes, they do it so discretely that it's easy to miss...because—you see—a redeemer does not choose to redeem someone on account of self-interest or self-promotion. They do it *for love*...they do it for God.

I think people who have experienced the unrepayable generosity of 'little r' redeemers have a particularly vivid sense of gratitude for Christ, our 'big r' Redeemer. I know I do. When you've been deeply blessed by a channel of God's grace or mercy, it is easy to praise God from whom *all those blessings flow!*

Well, here is my Christmas present for you! You've still got four good days of Christmas left. I'd like you to use these precious days in order to think about this and pray about it! Spend a little time reflecting upon the 'little r' redeemers from your past in order to gain a greater appreciation of what it means to belong together in Christ, our 'big r' Redeemer.

Can you remember a time when you were completely stuck with only bad choices...or maybe with *no* choices? When have you needed someone else to give you a new beginning or a fresh start or a clean slate? Perhaps at some point you incurred a financial debt you could not possibly repay, and someone stepped up to pay it for you.

Maybe, by your own fault or, possibly, through no fault of your own, you just needed a do-over in some non-financial aspect of your life. Who were the family members or friends or strangers who helped you start over?

Once you have come up with a name...or two or three names...or a dozen names of the 'little r' redeemers who have been channels of God's grace and mercy in your life, then I want you to take out your lesson sheet (which obviously means you need to take it home with you today). I want you to pray our opening collect again and again. You know it won't kill you to pray the Sunday Collect more than once a week!

"O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored the dignity of human nature..."

Dear people, it *is* a gift to be wonderfully created—*as we are*—in the image of God! And, it is an even greater gift when we get stuck, to be restored...*redeemed*...set free for a fresh start, a new beginning, a clean slate that we cannot possibly give to ourselves.

Today's beautiful prayer invites us to use these gifts we have received, in order to begin sharing the divine life of Christ, *here and now*. We are invited to use our gifts—like the Magi—in order to become channels of God's grace and mercy for other people.

This is precisely what St. Paul meant when he challenged the Ephesians (and us) to bless God “who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing.”

This is what St. Paul meant when he challenged the Ephesians (and us) to “know what is the hope to which God has called you.”

This is what St. Paul meant when he challenged the Ephesians (and us) to take stock of “the immeasurable greatness of God's power for those of us who believe.”

As we begin a new year, I pray that you will look beyond what is broken or incomplete or disappointing, and see opportunities which need to be redeemed. I hope you will recognize the many miraculous channels of God's grace and mercy which have made your life to become like a watered garden; and then choose to share the fruits of your blessing with others who need redeeming.

In the midst of this world's despair, let's not lose sight of the hope to which Christ has called us, the *redeeming hope of love*.

Amen.