

Greetings! By Daniel H. Kuhn, Jr. A4081221

2 Samuel 7:1-11 and Luke 1:26-38

Elon Community Church, United Church of Christ, 21 December, 2008

Greetings! It's been quite a week in our world. Here is proof. The Detroit auto industry is near bankruptcy and two manufacturers are about to be bailed out by a \$13.4 billion loan from a congressional fund. The Picower Foundation that funded charities with more than \$1 billion in assets had to shut down Friday because those assets were managed by Bernie Madoff, the one who engineered the largest world-wide Ponzi scheme.¹ The President of the United States of America made jokes about shoes thrown at him by a reporter in Baghdad, Iraq. Kicked and beaten into unconsciousness, José Sucuzhañay died at a hospital in New York City because three men in a passing car thought José and his brother Romel were gay.² The Governor of the State of Illinois is accused of selling a seat in the United States Senate.³ Greetings!

But, hold on to your faith. Christmas is coming. You may think the world insane today, but it was every bit as insane on that first Christmas. Here is some information about the world of Palestine in 4 BC. Herod, the ruler, was a mad man. He had ten wives. He ordered the executions of his wife Mariamne, and three sons, Alexander, Aristabulus, and Antipater. He ordered the execution of Bethlehem's children. He built fortifications in the middle of the desert, saying, "Let the cities burn!" This is the one to whom your life would have been entrusted had you been living there and then!

Greetings! It was into this world that God sent a child, a helpless infant to be the savior. Consider, for a moment, the story of a young girl. She was alone and poor. She became pregnant, and life would have been difficult for her. Girls who became pregnant in other ways than by their husbands were subject to the death penalty in those days. Would her fiancé order her death? Would he issue her a decree of divorce? Girls who gave birth and were unmarried, had to support themselves and their children. Who would take her in? A pregnant teenager would have been a disgrace to her parents. Would she be able to find food for herself and her baby? Greetings!

"Greetings!" That is what the angel, one Gabriel by name, said to her. "Greetings favored one!" See, when God visits us, it is usually in ways we did not anticipate. I can picture Mary praying during her devotions, "Adonay, Lord God, intervene in our world and bring peace and prosperity to my people Israel."

She did not expect that God would visit her and say, "You're going to be pregnant!" That's intervention! When we pray for faith, and to help those who are losing their jobs, we don't expect to have the police knock on our door at 1:30 a.m. and say, "I have some news for you." God intervenes in ways that we do not anticipate.

But, the angel reassured the frightened young woman that when things look bleakest and darkest, that is when our hearts can be open to God's grace. "Greetings, The Lord is with you." he said. He went on, speaking to this young woman in a tiny town built into caves on a hillside in Galilee, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor

¹*New York Times* Friday, December 19

²*New York Times* Wednesday, December 17

³*New York Times* Tuesday, December 16

David”⁴

The key to the greetings is this, “The Lord is with you.” That is what it’s all about: The Lord is with you! It’s not that God causes unplanned pregnancies, but that God is with you through the unplanned pregnancies. It’s not that God causes the murder of innocents, but that God is with you to give strength and peace.

This frightened teenage girl received the message of comfort and hope. She responded willingly with the words, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Can we be as open and willing as she was, to be a channel, a tool, for God’s grace?

More than one hundred years ago, Christina G. Rossetti, (1830-1894) wrote the words to the Christmas hymn, “In the Bleak Midwinter.” “In the bleak midwinter, Frosty wind made moan, Earth stood hard as iron, Water like a stone; Snow had fallen, snow on snow, Snow on snow, In the bleak midwinter, Long ago.”

It was in the bleak midwinter, when things looked hopeless, when living grew cold and hard, that God broke into human affairs with a gift. It was the time of year when the night was longest, temperatures were lowest, and light was dimmest that a new light was given to the human race.

We don’t experience darkness the way common people did as recently as two hundred years ago. Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write, “According to an exhibit entitled ‘The History of Light’ at the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam a few years ago, ordinary people— meaning the majority of the population— could not afford candles until around the year 1800. When night fell, it was dark, very dark. Our ancestors knew darkness in a way that we do not.”⁵

God broke into the darkness with a light. It was the light of forgiveness, the light of grace, the light of kindness, the light of love, and we have been the recipients of that light. The Christmas story is formed in retrospect. The followers of Jesus in his later years came to know of his importance. They knew the depth of his love. They knew his teachings of turning the other cheek, feeding the hungry, and of loving God, neighbor, and self. They knew that he gave up his life for the good of all human kind. They wondered and asked about his younger years, his childhood, and back to his birth. It is they who recorded what that birth might have been like. It is they who knew of the meaning of a helpless infant, born in a cattle feed trough in a grotto behind the inn, to a poor frightened woman in a third-rate province ruled by a distant empire. It was to these people in a hopeless situation that God gave hope.

I don’t know what you may be going through in your life. It could be an upcoming surgery. It could be dealing with a parent who needs nursing care or a loved one who has died. It could be the loss of investment savings or the loss of a job. When you are facing your bleak midwinter, may your heart be open to the promise that God gives:

“Greetings, I am with you.” You will conceive hope. You will receive a savior.

When things are darkest, God gives grace. It is at midnight when we are most ready to see the light.

⁴Luke 1:30-32

⁵*The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’s Birth* by Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan © 2007, Harper Collins Publishers, page 173