

Crisis in a significant personal relationship may render us vulnerable. What we had depended on suddenly changes as a friend or a loved one abandons us and walks out of our life forever. Or our vulnerability may come in a season of failure and frustration when nothing we do seems to work, when we no longer can control the outcome, and when the consequences overwhelm us. Or it may be a protracted illness that upsets our careful timetables and weakens us to the point that we must depend upon the care and help of others, sometimes upon their feeding us or holding us up for a few faltering steps. Or it may come in the shadows of grief when another's death empties our world and nothing matters much in the awful loneliness that consumes us.

Perhaps the vulnerability comes with the realization that we do not want what we have worked so hard to get, that achievement and status have not yielded the hoped-for satisfaction; that the future no longer excites us; that life seems nothing more than going through the motions; that something terribly important is missing in us and between us and that we have been standing on the sidelines while life and meaning passed us by.

Whatever our vulnerability, it can be the opening through which we finally allow Jesus to enter our lives. Through our pain or confusion or fear, we can be awakened to God's call. It was such an awakening that John the Baptist sought through his ministry and his radical message in the Judean wilderness. He challenged people to admit their need and to repent, to claim God's promise and to be ready to meet the Messiah. John knew that people would not recognize, let alone receive, the Messiah unless they were reachable and approachable, which is part of what repentance means and why John's preaching called people to it. Jesus comes to us today where we are vulnerable, where barriers fall away and we are accessible.

Jesus also comes today where people take **risks of faith** and act boldly in spite of consequence. We are vulnerable then, also, as we give up being in control and entrust ourselves and the outcome to God. If we want to experience the persuasion of Christ's presence, we must be willing to hazard the challenge of going the second mile, of loving our enemies, of setting at liberty those who are captive, of making peace, of feeding the hungry, and of casting out those modern-day demons that possess and tyrannize our world. If we want to know the power of Jesus with us and within us, we must say our 'yes' to whatever summons or tasks he calls us to. As U.N. Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld put it, "only one feat is possible – not to have run away."

The Apostle Paul did not run away, even in the most desperate of circumstances, and he could proclaim, *I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord* (Phil. 3:8). The monk Telemachus did not run away. Instead, with incredible courage, he challenged the bloody gladiatorial games at Rome by one day jumping down into the arena to separate the contestants; his witness moved the Emperor Honorius to ban the games throughout the empire. Elizabeth Fry did not run away. In the nineteenth century, she mounted a one woman campaign to humanize prisons in England. It was a lonely struggle, marked by villainy and ridicule, but she endured because she sensed Jesus beside her.

Similar stories are written in our world by the lives of persons who have taken risks of faith and embodied the gospel, who have told of how Jesus came to them with assurance and courage. Jesus draws near to them, empowering them with his presence to carry on the work of the kingdom with passionate hope.

Jesus always offered simple but costly solutions to complex human dilemmas, solutions arrived at by some definite action: lifting up the crippled to walk again, urging the rich to give to the poor, teaching in Jerusalem, cleansing the temple, healing on the Sabbath, taking his place with the outcasts, touching a leper, and dying on the cross. To experience his inspiring and empowering presence is to involve ourselves in the world as he did. It may mean being lifted up like our Lord, not for praise or rewards, but to suffering and rejection, only to find Jesus beside us in the struggle.

Jesus also comes today where, in **love**, people help one another, affirm one another, want what is best for one another and work to make this possible. Where people create beauty in the world, Jesus comes. Where love grows and transforms the wilderness of alienation, injustice, indignity, and exploitation, Jesus comes. Where persons nurture their loyalty and commitment to each other, where persons reach out with constancy of caring, where persons cherish and respect each other, Jesus comes. And where Jesus comes, love is present.

One of my childhood heroes was Eric Liddell, the Scottish sprinter who won medals at the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris. His story was told dramatically in the movie *Chariots of Fire*. The movie focused on Liddell's refusal to run on Sunday – the Lord's Day – and so he forfeited his place and his opportunity to win the gold medal in his best event. Sadly, the movie stops there. As impressive as Liddell's stand was during the Olympic Games, it was

the life he lived after the games that impresses me more. He traveled to China as a Christian missionary. When the Japanese overran China in the 1930's, Liddell stayed, only to be interned at a labor camp where he continued to teach and organize sporting events to raise the spirits of the prisoners.

Liddell usually volunteered for the most menial and physically exhausting duties at the camp, taking the place of prisoners who were sick or weak. Given the opportunity to leave the camp as part of a prisoner exchange, Liddell refused, giving his place to another prisoner. When Liddell later died in the prison camp, all 1,800 prisoners attended his funeral service, a testament to the great love Liddell showed to his fellow inmates. Jesus comes where such love is freely given and warmly received.

When Jesus was born 2,000 years ago, his presence filled a cave outside the village of Bethlehem, confounding official religious authorities and their expectations about the Messiah. He comes today in the most unlikely places, confounding those who are religious and surprising those who may not be religious at all. He comes to us all at those boundary moments of life when we are vulnerable and reachable. He draws near when we take the risks of faith and act boldly in scorn of consequence to serve the kingdom. Jesus comes near when we love and care for each other and when we bring beauty to bleak places of the heart.

Prayer: Lord, we pray to you, the Holy One who comes to us. Come to us with new beginnings. Come to us with healing for physical and emotional wounds. Come to us with light for our shadows. Come to us with peace for our conflicts, wholeness for our brokenness, hope for our despair, and power to overcome our doubts and fears. Come to us that we may come closer to each other and to those in need. Come to us in Jesus Christ and make us ready to let him live in us. Amen.

Source: Donald J. Shelby. *The Unsettling Season: Advent-Christmas-Epiphany*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. 1989. Pgs. 45-62.

## Where Jesus Came – and Comes!

Sunday, December 14, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

***Micah 5:2-4*** and ***Matthew 3:1-12***

If you visit Jerusalem, you can walk where King Herod the Great roamed his palace and where the Magi came to inquire of him about the birth of a new king. Herod's palace is gone, but archaeologists can project the size and grandeur of it from the foundations still intact. Herod had several such palaces, opulent and impressive royal dwellings; symbols of power, wealth, authority and control. Celebrities, decision-makers, and courtiers all vied for space in the corridors of Herod's palaces.

It's not surprising that visitors from the East, wanting to discover the newborn king of the Jews, would head to Herod's palace in Jerusalem. Wouldn't that be the logical place where royalty would be born? But this was not the birthplace of the king they sought. So where would he be found? When Herod asked his seers and priests for clues about this pretender to his throne, they would quote the messianic prophecy of Micah, who in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. declared: *But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are one of little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel.* (v. 5:2)

So, in Bethlehem, a small village about six miles south of Jerusalem, where King David had been born and grew up 1,000 years before, another child was born. Not in a palace, but in a cave or a stable where animals were kept. Jesus came where he was not expected. Jesus Christ keeps coming today in the midst of our present realities and contradictions, where and when we least expect him.

Jesus often comes to us at those boundary moments of life when we are **vulnerable** and, therefore, most accessible. Sometimes in our weakest moments, when our attempts at self-sufficiency no longer sustain us, Jesus comes. In such intervals our barriers are lowered, our deeper needs are exposed and finally acknowledged, and our very soul is laid bare. There, in our very weakness, Jesus finds us and offers us salvation.