

December 25, 2018
Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Christmas Day
Vicar Jonah Bruce

“Christmas Blessings from a Crocodile”

Merry Christmas!

May the Peace and love of our Lord Jesus Christ warmly embrace each of us on this wonderful Christmas morning.

Last Sunday evening, many of us gathered to watch a spectacular telling of the Christmas story. Our Sunday school children worked hard to remind us of God’s love in and through the gift of Jesus Christ on that first Christmas morning. They did an excellent job and watching them brought back memories of my very first Christmas pageant. In fact, it was not only my first Christmas pageant, but also my first Christ centered Christmas. The pageant was titled: “A Strange Way to Save the World” and looking back – they could not have picked a better title.

I had begun attending church late in the year, so the Sunday school teachers were still uncertain about my ability to speak in front of a crowd. Of course, this meant that I was not eligible for any of the more prominent roles within the Christmas pageant. In fact, I think that there was a shortage of costumes because I ended up playing a crocodile. To this day, I cannot find a biblical reference that supports a crocodile being a part of the manger scene, nor have I found historical data to support crocodiles ever being a part of Bethlehem’s culture. But, there I was. I had this hideous long green snout on top of my head and a tail that I was constantly turning and hitting the wise-men with.

In all honesty, I thought the stage was set for the pageant to be nothing short of a disaster. I felt insignificant and foolish in my costume, but I begrudgingly went along with it all because as they say, the show must go on.

The evening of the pageant quickly came upon us – and as it usually does with these sort of things, the unthinkable happened – while all eyes were fixed on the angel Gabriel’s appearance, one of the live goats that we were using as part of the pageant, turned his head and ate part of the doll that was set to represent the baby Jesus. Thinking quickly, one of the Sunday school teachers ran to the nursery and brought up a non-severed doll. She got Jesus upstairs just in time for the manger scene to begin.

In hindsight, I will tell you that she could not have grabbed a more perfect doll. It was one of those dolls that speak when you squeeze it. Perhaps you have seen them? As you might imagine, this doll had a very unique message to share.

As I was making my grand entrance as a fumbling and might I say hideous looking crocodile, our teacher placed the baby Jesus in the manger and as though it were right on cue, we heard the speaking doll proclaim: “I love crocodiles.”

Some people laughed, some were horrified, and others just sat there with a confused look on their face. Was this a part of the show? An odd coincidence? Or perhaps a moment of divine intervention?

I don't know why these events happened in the way that they did, but to this day, I remember the way that it made me feel. In that moment, through those few simple words, I went from being an insignificant background character who felt carelessly thrown into play – to one of the stars of show. And for the first time in my life, I felt as though Jesus was there not only for everyone else, but for me and that changed my entire perspective on the Christmas story.

Jesus was no longer a distant character who had come to save the world – he was a friend who had come to save me.

And much like the shepherds in today's text who begin to proclaim and make known what has been told to them – I stand here on this wonderful Christmas morning to share that same Christmas message: Christ, our beloved Emmanuel, is here and he loves you, he loves me, he loves all of us. Emmanuel is God with us, and God is actually with us. God isn't just a character in a story from over 2000 years ago – God is here and God is with us both on this blessed Christmas day and every day.

What I love most about my first Christmas pageant is that it opened my eyes and made me see that Christ hadn't just come for those who seemed powerful or important within society. I seemed so insignificant in my role as a crocodile, but out of all of the animals, angels, and people that the children's doll could have mentioned, it so unexpectedly called to me. And isn't that exactly what Christ has done? He was born in one of the most unexpected places: a feeding trough. The angel appeared to shepherds, people who were at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy in first-century Palestine. They had not anticipated that they would be called or touched by God. And instead of choosing royalty for parents, Gabriel appeared to Mary and Joseph who were common everyday people. It was such a strange way for the promised and long awaited King, our Messiah, to enter the world. Surely, like me, Mary, Joseph, and the Shepherds, must have been in wonder and awe at not only what God was doing, but how God was doing it! It was truly "A Strange Way to Save the World."

But, that is the beauty of it! As Luke's gospel reminds us, from Christ's very moment of entrance, those who are on the fringes of society, those who are just common everyday people, begin to participate in the life and hope of a God who has come to save the world. The Christmas story is designed so perfectly to include the lowly and the unexpected – it's designed to give hope to all people, especially those who have been pushed to the fringes of society. Amidst the vulnerability of a human birth, God's mission of love is made known. Amidst a manger scene surrounded by the lowly and unexpected, the Christmas message of hope reaches to the edges of society and says: this message is "for you."

In a Christmas Day sermon from 1544, Martin Luther argues that the word: "you" is one of the most important words in the Christmas narrative because it makes the story of Christ applicable to us in our places of here and now. The angel in the Christmas story is speaking to us; the joyful message of hope is for us. To us, in the city of David, a Savior was born who is Christ the Lord.

Whether Christmas is a time of happiness or sorrow, excitement or fear, laughter or tears – there is hope and there is comfort because Emmanuel is with us. And that gives reason to celebrate, not only today, but every day. For God loves us and gives us hope in and through the promise of Jesus Christ.

I hope, with all of my heart, that the message of Christmas will stir amidst us and bring a newness of hope and a willingness to share Christ's love in word and action with all people – with those who sit amongst us in the Assembly of God, those who are yet to hear or have rejected the gospel message, and those who sit on the edges of our society, because the Christmas message is for all people. It is a message of hope and peace in a world that is so connected yet divided. It's a message for people who struggle to see the light of hope amidst their circumstances, just as much as it is a message for those who have been blessed with the good things of this earth.

May God's love and compassion that comes to us in the birth of Christ, flow through us that all might come to see and know that God is ever present, journeying with us, despite what the circumstances of this life might lead us to believe.

May's God's glory and peace shine brightly on this Christmas morning – for God loves all people – all of creation – even the crocodiles.

Amen.