

Luke 3:1-6
December 9, '18

“YUKON THE SAMARITAN”

AS CHRISTIANS, WE OFTEN SEEM TO BE UNREASONABLY & EVEN IRRATIONALLY OBSESSED WITH WHAT WE SEE AS A CONFLICT BETWEEN WHAT WE CALL “*THE SECULAR VERSUS THE SACRED.*”

WE’RE CONSTANTLY HEARING OF ALL THE WAYS THAT SOCIETY HAS A PREJUDICE AGAINST CHRISTIANS & HOW WE ARE, SOMEHOW, AN OPPRESSED GROUP OF PEOPLE.

A PERFECT EXAMPLE IS THE UPROAR OVER WHETHER OR NOT TO SAY “*MERRY CHRISTMAS*” OR “*HAPPY HOLIDAYS*” IN DECEMBER.

DOES IT REALLY MATTER?

IF SOMEONE SAYS “*HAPPY HOLIDAYS*” INSTEAD OF “*MERRY CHRISTMAS,*” IS THAT REALLY A SIGN OF OPPRESSION OR PREJUDICE AGAINST CHRISTIANS?

UNFORTUNATELY, OUR INSISTENCE ON SAYING “*MERRY CHRISTMAS*” ALMOST COMES ACROSS AS BELLIGERENCE.

“*MERRY CHRISTMAS – AND DON’T YOU DARE TELL ME I CAN’T SAY THAT!*”

THIS OBSESSION OVER “*SECULAR VS. SACRED*” IS A CONFLICT THAT EXISTS ONLY IF WE ALLOW IT.

IT’S ALL A MATTER OF PERSPECTIVE.

THIS HAS BEEN THE PREMISE OF OUR CHRISTIANITY & THE ARTS PROGRAM SINCE ITS INCEPTION.

THERE IS A CLOSE CONNECTION BETWEEN THE WORLD OF CHRISTIANITY & THE WORLD OF THE ARTS AND SOMETHING DOESN’T HAVE TO BE OVERTLY CHRISTIAN FOR IT TO CONTAIN A CHRISTIAN MESSAGE.

THAT’S ALSO BEEN THE PREMISE OF OUR SERIES ON “*SECULAR BOOKS, MOVIES & SONGS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL.*”

THIS IS GOD’S WORLD & WE CAN FIND – IF WE CHOOSE – THE HAND OF GOD AT WORK IN EVERYTHING AROUND US.

DURING ADVENT THIS YEAR, WE’RE LOOKING AT “*SECULAR CHRISTMAS SONGS, MOVIES & BOOKS THAT SPEAK TO THE SOUL.*”

IT IS, PERHAPS AT CHRISTMAS MORE THAN ANY TIME, THAT WE HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO UNITE THE SECULAR WITH THE SACRED IF WE WILL BUT OPEN OUR EYES & OUR HEARTS TO SEE IT & EXPERIENCE IT.

OUR SON DEREK HAS AN ENTIRE ADVENT SERMON SERIES THAT HE CALLS “*THE TRIAL OF THE CHRISTMAS CREATURES.*”

HIS PREMISE IS THAT THE SECULAR CREATURES OF CHRISTMAS – BELOVED CHARACTERS SUCH AS THE GRINCH & FROSTY THE SNOWMAN - HAVE BEEN ACCUSED OF WHAT DEREK CALLS “*GRAND THEFT HOLIDAY.*”

WE ACCUSE THESE CREATURES OF TAKING SOMETHING THAT IS HOLY & SACRED AND TURNING IT INTO SOMETHING THAT IS SECULAR & COMMERCIAL.

DEREK’S CONTENTION IS THAT THE CREATURES ARE ON OUR SIDE.

THEY’RE DOING EVERYTHING THEY CAN TO REMIND US OF WHAT CHRISTMAS IS REALLY ALL ABOUT.

I’D LIKE US TO CONSIDER ONE OF THESE CHRISTMAS CREATURES THIS MORNING.

I’VE CHOSEN THIS PARTICULAR CREATURE BECAUSE HIS STORY INCLUDES A NUMBER OF OTHER CREATURES WHO CAN REMIND US OF THE TRUE MEANING OF CHRISTMAS.

I THINK THESE CREATURES CAN ALSO FIT VERY WELL WITH OUR LECTIONARY GOSPEL READING FOR THIS, THE SECOND OF ADVENT – THAT PASSAGE THAT INCLUDED ALL THOSE NAMES & PLACES THAT MADE YOU GLAD DICK WAS READING THAT PASSAGE THIS MORNING AND NOT YOU!

BUT THOSE NAMES WILL BE IMPORTANT AS YOU’LL LEARN IN A FEW MINUTES.

WITH WHAT I’VE CHOSEN FOR THIS MORNING, WE COULD HAVE USED IT FOR EITHER THE SONG OR BOOK PORTION OF THE SERIES, BUT I’VE OPTED FOR THE MOVIE INSTEAD.

I’M TALKING ABOUT “*RUDOLPH, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER.*”

IT COULD HAVE BEEN IN THE BOOK PORTION OF THE SERIES BECAUSE THAT’S HOW IT FIRST STARTED.

IN THE 1930’S, THE CHICAGO-BASED DEPARTMENT STORE, MONTGOMERY WARD, HAD A TRADITION OF BUYING COLORING BOOKS & DISTRIBUTING THEM, FREE-OF-CHARGE, TO THEIR CUSTOMERS.

ONE OF THEIR EXECUTIVES THOUGHT THAT, RATHER THAN PURCHASING BOOKS, IT MIGHT MAKE MORE SENSE TO CREATE ONE THEMSELVES.

THE ASSIGNMENT WAS GIVEN TO A 34-YEAR-OLD COPYWRITER, ROBERT MAY.

HE WAS CHALLENGED TO COME UP WITH A SHORT CHRISTMAS-BASED CHILDREN’S STORY THAT MONTGOMERY WARD COULD PRINT IN BOOKLET FORM TO GIVE TO THEIR CUSTOMERS.

MAY CAME UP WITH A HOLIDAY VERSION OF “THE UGLY DUCKLING.”

HE WAS HAVING DIFFICULTY MAKING IT WORK – EVEN THOUGH HE’D DECIDED A REINDEER WOULD BE THE MAIN CHARACTER SINCE HIS STORY WAS TO HAVE A CHRISTMAS THEME.

IT ALL CAME TOGETHER ONE DAY AS HE WAS STARING OUT HIS OFFICE WINDOW IN DOWNTOWN CHICAGO.

A THICK FOG FROM LAKE MICHIGAN BLOCKED HIS VIEW & WITH THAT FOG CAME A FLASH OF INSPIRATION.

“SUDDENLY, I HAD IT!” HE RECALLED LATER. “A BRIGHT RED NOSE THAT WOULD SHINE THROUGH FOG LIKE A SPOTLIGHT!”

YES, WE COULD USE RUDOLPH IN THE BOOK PORTION OF THIS SERIES IF WE WERE LOOKING AT JOHN’S VERSION OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY.

IN HIS FIRST CHAPTER, HE SAYS, “WHAT HAS COME INTO BEING IN HIM WAS LIFE, AND THE LIFE WAS THE LIGHT OF ALL PEOPLE. THE LIGHT SHINES IN THE DARKNESS, AND THE DARKNESS DID NOT OVERCOME IT.”

WE COULD ALSO USE RUDOLPH IN THE SONG PORTION OF THIS SERIES BECAUSE THAT’S PROBABLY HOW MOST OF US KNOW THE STORY BEST.

ROBERT MAY GAVE THE BOOK TO HIS BROTHER-IN-LAW, JOHNNY MARKS, AND ASKED HIM TO COME UP WITH A SONG TO GO ALONG WITH THE STORY.

MARKS DID & HE TRIED TO GET A NUMBER OF WELL-KNOWN ARTISTS TO RECORD IT – SINGERS LIKE DINAH SHORE & BING CROSBY.

NO ONE WAS INTERESTED – THAT IS, UNTIL HE SUBMITTED IT TO GENE AUTRY.

AUTRY’S 1949 RECORDING OF “RUDOLPH, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER” REMAINS ONE OF THE BEST-SELLING CHRISTMAS SONGS OF ALL TIME.

SO WE COULD HAVE USED IT AS A BOOK OR A SONG IN THIS SERIES, BUT WE’VE CHOSEN THE 1964 ANIMATED MOVIE INSTEAD.

ONE REASON IS BECAUSE – IN THE MOVIE – YOU GET SOME OTHER CREATURES WHO CONVEY THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE EVERY BIT AS MUCH AS RUDOLPH DOES.

FIRST OF ALL, THERE’S CLARICE – THE ONE FRIEND WHO WON’T ABANDON RUDOLPH.

WHEN HE’S SAD & DEPRESSED AT BEING REJECTED BECAUSE OF HIS GLOWING NOSE, CLARICE RAISES HIS SPIRITS WITH A SONG –

***“THERE’S ALWAYS TOMORROW,
FOR DREAMS TO COME TRUE,
TOMORROW IS NOT FAR AWAY.
WE ALL PRETEND,
THE RAINBOW HAS AN END,
AND YOU’LL BE THERE MY FRIEND SOMEDAY.”***

THERE’S A BIBLICAL MESSAGE IN THAT SONG.

WHETHER IT’S THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL WANDERING IN THE WILDERNESS OR SHADRACH, MESHACH & ABEDNEGO IN THE FIERY FURNACE –

WHETHER IT’S MARTHA & MARY MOURNING THE DEATH OF THEIR BROTHER LAZARUS OR THE PARALYTIC AT THE POOL OF BETHSAIDA –

WHETHER IT’S THE SHEPHERDS IN A FIELD OUTSIDE BETHLEHEM OR A GROUP OF MAGI TRAVELLING FROM THE EAST –

OR EVEN NOAH HIMSELF ON HIS ARK IN THE MIDDLE OF AN EARTH-COVERING FLOOD – THOSE WORDS OF CLARICE ABOUT A RAINBOW RING TRUE – “*THERE’S ALWAYS TOMORROW – THE RAINBOW HAS AN END & YOU’LL BE THERE, MY FRIEND, SOMEDAY.*”

ANOTHER CREATURE IN “RUDOLPH” IS HERMIE – THE ELF WHO REALLY WANTED TO BE A DENTIST.

HE FINDS HIMSELF LOOKED DOWN UPON BY ALL THE OTHER ELVES SIMPLY BECAUSE HE FEELS A DIFFERENT CALLING IN HIS LIFE.

HOW DO YOU THINK ZACCHAEUS FELT WHEN JESUS CALLED HIM DOWN FROM THE SYCAMORE TREE?

HE WAS HATED BY EVERYONE AS A TAX COLLECTOR & THEN, WHEN HE WELCOMED JESUS INTO HIS HOME, REPENTED FOR HIS GREED & RETURNED MONEY TO THOSE HE’D CHEATED, HOW DO YOU THINK HIS FELLOW TAX COLLECTORS LOOKED AT HIM?

HE BECAME A VIRTUAL MISFIT IN THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY.

HERMIE & RUDOLPH SING ABOUT THE EXPERIENCE OF SOMEONE LIKE ZACCHAEUS WITH THE WORDS:

“WE MAY BE DIFFERENT FROM THE REST

WHO DECIDES THE TEST

OF WHAT IS REALLY BEST?

WE’RE A COUPLE OF MISFITS

WHAT’S THE MATTER WITH MISFITS

THAT’S WHERE WE FIT IN!”

AND, OF COURSE, THERE’S MORE ABOUT MISFITS

LATER IN THE MOVIE WHEN RUDOLPH & HERMIE

END UP ON “THE ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS,” AND RUN INTO A JACK-IN-THE-BOX NAMED CHARLIE.

WHO WANTS A JACK-IN-THE-BOX NAMED CHARLIE!?

HE'S A MISFIT AS ARE ALL THE OTHER TOYS ON THE ISLAND - A COWBOY THAT RIDES AN OSTRICH, A TRAIN WITH SQUARE WHEELS, A BIRD THAT SWIMS.

THEY'RE ALL MISFITS.

BUT IN THE END OF THE MOVIE, THEY ALL GET HOMES – THEY'RE ALL WELCOMED, EVEN THOUGH THEY'RE MISFITS.

THERE ARE MISFITS ALL THROUGH THE BIBLE: MOSES - A GUY WHO'S AFRAID TO SPEAK IN PUBLIC -LEADING THE CHILDREN OF ISRAEL TO THE PROMISED LAND; DAVID, THE YOUNGEST OF ALL OF JESSE'S SONS BEING CHOSEN TO BE KING OF ISRAEL.

AND IN THE CHRISTMAS STORY ITSELF, MARY WAS A MISFIT – THE UNLIKELIEST OF ALL POSSIBLE CANDIDATES TO BE THE MOTHER OF THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD.

THERE'S A BIBLICAL MESSAGE IN “RUDOLPH” FOR ALL OF US WHO FEEL LIKE MISFITS IN THE WORLD AROUND US.

***“WHO DECIDES THE TEST
OF WHAT IS REALLY BEST?”***

HERMIE & RUDOLPH DON'T GIVE AN ANSWER, BUT YOU KNOW WHO IT IS.

YOU KNOW THAT, EVEN WHEN YOU FEEL LIKE A MISFIT IN A SOCIAL SETTING OR WORK ENVIRONMENT – OR EVEN IN CHURCH – YOU AREN'T A MISFIT IN GOD'S EYES.

GOD HAS CREATED YOU FOR SOMETHING UNIQUELY YOURS.

GOD HAS CHOSEN YOU TO BE HIS CHILD FOR A GREAT PURPOSE.

THERE'S ANOTHER CHARACTER IN THE “RUDOLPH” MOVIE WHOSE ROLE CONTAINS AN INCREDIBLY POWERFUL & VERY

OBVIOUS CHRISTIAN MESSAGE – BUT ONLY IF YOU HAVE THE EYES & THE HEART TO SEE IT.

DO YOU REMEMBER YUKON CORNELIUS?

LET ME JUST TELL YOU HIS PLACE IN THE STORY & SEE IF A PARABLE OF JESUS DOESN'T JUMP RIGHT OUT AT YOU.

RUDOLPH & HERMIE SET OUT ON A JOURNEY.

THEY'RE TRAVELING A DANGEROUS ROAD.

FROM OUT OF NOWHERE, THE ADMONABLE SNOW MONSTER APPEARS, INTENT ON DOING THEM GREAT HARM.

YUKON CORNELIUS, TRAVELLING FROM THE NORTH, SEES THEIR PREDICAMENT & IS THERE AT THEIR SIDE TO RESCUE THEM.

HE PLACES THEM ON HIS ANIMAL & TAKES THEM ALL THE WAY TO AN INN ON THE ISLAND OF MISFIT TOYS TO TAKE CARE OF THEM & SEE THAT THEY GET SAFELY TO WHERE THEY'RE GOING.

IN ALL THE TIMES THAT YOU'VE WATCHED “RUDOLPH, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER,” DID YOU EVER OPEN YOUR EYES & YOUR HEART ENOUGH TO SEE YUKON CORNELIUS AS THE GOOD SAMARITAN?

WITH SO MANY OF OUR SEEMINGLY SECULAR TRADITIONS OF CHRISTMAS, THERE IS A BIBLICAL MESSAGE HIDDEN INSIDE.

THOSE SEEMINGLY SECULAR SNIPPETS CAN SPEAK TO OUR SOUL IF WE WILL BUT LET THEM.

THE TONGUE-TYING GOSPEL LECTIONARY PASSAGE FROM LUKE THAT DICK READ FOR US THIS MORNING, FITS PERFECTLY WITH RUDOLPH'S STORY.

YOU SEE, LUKE – MORE THAN ANY OF THE OTHER THREE GOSPEL WRITERS – SAW HIMSELF AS AN HISTORIAN.

THERE'S A REASON HE PUTS THE STORY OF JESUS INTO ITS PROPER HISTORICAL CONTEXT.

THERE IS AN AUDACITY TO WHAT HE TELLS US IN THESE OPENING VERSES.

LUKE LISTS SEVEN – COUNT ‘EM – SEVEN POWERFUL LEADERS AT THE TIME.

THERE'S THE EMPORER TIBERIUS, PONTIUS PILATE, HEROD, PHILIP, LYSANIAS, ANNAS & CAIAPHAS.

SOMEONE HAS POINTED OUT THAT “AS YOU READ THE LIST ALOUD IT SOUNDS LIKE AN OMINOUS LITANY OR LOUD & INSISTENT DRUMBEAT, MARSHALLING THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC & RELIGIOUS POWERS & PRINCIPALITIES TO WAR.”

BUT THEN – AFTER THAT LONG LIST OF POWERFUL LEADERS – LUKE MAKES THE AUDACIOUS CLAIM THAT “THE WORD OF THE GOD CAME TO JOHN IN THE WILDERNESS.”

THE WORD OF GOD DIDN'T COME TO TIBERIUS OR PONTIUS PILATE OR HEROD OR PHILIP OR LYSANIAS OR ANNA OR CAIAPHAS.

BY THE TIME LUKE'S COMMUNITY WAS READING THESE WORDS, NONE OF THOSE SEVEN LEADERS WAS STILL ALIVE & YET THE STORIES OF JESUS & JOHN THE BAPTIST WERE STILL BEING TOLD.

AND TODAY?

TODAY, THOSE 7 BOLD & POWERFUL LEADERS SERVE AS LITTLE MORE THAN FOOTNOTES IN THE STORY OF CHRIST.

NOW, GOING BACK TO THE “RUDOLPH” STORY, JOHN THE BAPTIST WAS A MISFIT IF EVER THERE WAS ONE!

AND THE ONE WHOSE COMING HE ANNOUNCES IS AN EVEN BIGGER MISFIT THAN JOHN!

SO HERE'S THE THING.

JOHN WAS A NOBODY & HE WOULD BE THE LAST PERSON ANYONE WOULD EXPECT TO BE CONVEYING A MESSAGE FROM GOD.

I THINK THAT'S THE LESSON FOR US TODAY.

AS WE MOVE THROUGH THESE DAYS OF ADVENT, OPEN YOUR EYES TO THE UNEXPECTED PLACES WHERE GOD IS SPEAKING A WORD OF HOPE, PEACE, JOY & LOVE.

MAYBE IT WILL BE IN WATCHING FROSTY THE SNOWMAN OR LINUS'S RECITATION OF LUKE'S CHRISTMAS STORY, OR THE NEW GRINCH MOVIE (WHICH, BY THE WAY, IS EXTRAORDINARY!).

MAYBE IT'LL BE YOUR EXPERIENCE OF SEEING "*THE NUTCRACKER*" OR MAYBE EVEN "*RUDOLF, THE RED-NOSED REINDEER.*"

MAYBE IT IS YOU WHO WILL BE THE UNEXPECTED PLACE FROM WHICH THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS IS PROCLAIMED TO ANOTHER.

THE MESSAGE OF CHRISTMAS IS ALL AROUND US IF WE BUT OPEN OUR EYES & OUR HEART TO SEE IT & EXPERIENCE IT. AMEN.

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