

The Miracle of Love

Dear Friends,

Never before can I recall a Christmas season when there has been so much anger, bitterness and hatred. I know I can join the multitudes who blame the president, the internet, the media, and even the church, but that still doesn't change the struggles within me. The blame game may leave me momentarily satisfied in my comfort zone but in the long run I will be the big loser when it comes to getting a clearer understanding of the real meaning of Christmas.

I have come to the realization that if Christmas is going to have any meaning this year I must leave this zone of self-justification and enter the world of those I feel most alienated from.

The miracle of Christmas after all is one whereby the creator and designer of the universe sends His Son to be born as a homeless baby in a world intoxicated by anger, greed and fear.

I love it when an angel appears and says, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David has been born unto you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord" (Luke 2:10, 11).

It would be so much easier to just spiritualize the baby, the angels and shepherds to be just another story in a different time and place. But this year I can't do that and hope to get any real meaning out of Christmas.

Ever since the "powers that be" shut down the New Life Evangelistic Center at 1411 Locust I have been struggling with anger and resentment toward those responsible. When I would see a "millennial with money" walking down that empty portion of Locust between 14th and 15th street I would feel bitterness rise up in me.

I remember how the streets were once shared with people who were homeless but now they are empty, with the exception of those who have money and dogs. I struggle with feelings of anger every time I pass Lucas Park at 14th and Locust and see dogs playing where homeless women and children once sat and played.

The problem is that I was becoming as prejudiced against those with money who now control this neighborhood as they were against the homeless and hurting. This has to stop somewhere lest it continues to add further to the hostility and hatred, which the world already has too much of.

I know that this Christmas I need the miracle of God's love more than ever before. It is this realization that causes the inner struggle to begin. It is so much easier to associate with people who agree with my point of view than it is to understand the fears and concerns of those who now think their lives are better off because they have rid the streets of "those homeless people."

This understanding does not call for my silence in the face of this injustice, but for me to enter the world of those I consider the perpetrators of injustice and listen to their concerns. From such listening I pray that reconciliation can come.

It is this miracle of Christmas that God is with us, that awakens the realizations that those we differ with are fellow human beings that are made in the image of God, and He also loves each and every one of them.

Now as I pray that there might be peace on earth and that God's revolution of love would take place, I must let it begin with me. Unless I face the bitterness and unloving attitudes in my own life I will never really be free to spread that love. Thank God for the Miracle of Christmas where God's perfect love casts out all fear and bitterness. This allows me to see those I differ with as fellow human beings with their own struggles and fears. As I do this I know I will be opening the door to a deeper understanding of the miracle of Christmas than I have ever had before.

The Miracle of Christmas is all about engagement. It involves God engaging with humanity by sending His Son into the world. Jesus came with compassion, getting His hands dirty, sore and worn in service with the promise that He has come to set the captives free. He provided this freedom through His death on the cross for our sins and his conquering of death through His resurrection. If we are not careful it is so easy to lose sight of this true meaning of Christmas.

Each year stores are starting earlier and earlier to entice people to buy things for Christmas. Buying more possessions becomes the central focus of Christmas. For many in America, possessions can easily come to possess. This materialistic system views individuals as consumers and markets to be exploited.

At this point you may be saying, “What does this have to do with me? I don’t have possessions to be possessed with.” Matt. 6:21 says, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The question for you and me is where is my heart? What really is the most important thing to me?

Jesus says in Matt. 23:37-40, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it; Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law and prophets hang on these two commands.”

When one experiences the truth of this in the depth of their being they have come to learn the real meaning of Christmas. Such an experience provides a freedom that Paul expresses in Phil. 4:12, 13. “I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength.”

It is this miracle of Christmas in us, which provides the freedom for us to give up our possessions to those in need rather than be possessed by them. This freedom to give, in realization that all we have has been freely given to us by God, is that secret that Paul learned when it came to being content in whatever the circumstances may be (Phil. 4:11). As he continues to outline the blessings of giving in Phil. 4:11-19, he states in verse 17, “not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account.”

Jesus explains this further when he says in Matt. 6:19-21, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” The fact is that none of earth’s possessions or treasures come anywhere close to giving that sense of fulfillment that comes through helping someone in need throughout the love of Jesus Christ.

How we need to thank God for sharing the treasure of His Son, Jesus Christ with us. Jesus, who was fully God and man is called in Matthew 1:23, "Immanuel... 'God with us.'" C.S. Lewis writes, "In the Christmas story, God descends to re-ascend. He comes down from the heights of absolute being into time and space, down into humanity; down further still, if embryologists are right, to recapitulate in the womb of ancient and pre-human phases of life; down to the very roots and sea-bed of the Nature He has created."

It is the fulfillment of this promise of God coming among us through Christ that we celebrate at Christmas. This Christmas gift is commonly referred to as good news or the gospel. Jim Wallis in his book, "Agenda for Biblical People", explains that "the gospel calls for radical allegiance to a Kingdom that is at fundamental variance with the "principalities and powers" which rules the world system. The standards and values of the world undergo a trans-valuation, a reversal, an inversion in Jesus Christ. A commitment to Christ entails a radical change in our relationship to money and possessions, violence and war, power status, success, leadership, ideology and the state. Our relationship to Christ gives us a new relationship to the persons and especially to the poor, the weak, the broken, the outcasts, the "enemies" and the victims of the various systems of the world."

Jesus' proclamation of freedom is good news to everyone who is poor, or captivated by this world's materialistic system. He offers healing to those who have been blinded by their possessions as well as freedom to those who have been stepped on and kicked aside because they are poor or homeless.

In Luke 4:18, 19 Jesus declared, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are downtrodden, proclaim the favorable year of the Lord."

Ron Sider in his book, "Genuine Christianity," explained how true believers are different from those who commonly refer to themselves as Christians. He writes, "most Christians mimic the world! They are often as self-centered, as sexually promiscuous, as racist and materialistic as their unbelieving friends. They worship wealth, commit adultery, file for divorce, and destroy the environment like their neighbors."

“Blatant disobedient conformity to the world has plagued Christians for centuries. We have launched vicious crusades to slaughter Muslims; we have fabricated “biblical” arguments to justify slavery and racism. Now, as the modern world redefines happiness as individual self-fulfillment and ever expanding material abundance, we construct new gospels of wealth and self-esteem. The world sneers at our hypocrisy, convinced that Christians, who largely defy the One they allegedly worship, have nothing to offer.”

“At one time, Mahatma Gandhi, the greatest Hindu of the twentieth century, seriously considered accepting the claims of Christ because he loved the Jesus of the Gospels. But when he compared how Christians live with the teachings of Jesus, Gandhi turned away in revulsion. He said, ‘I consider Western Christianity in its practical working a negation of Christ’s Christianity.’”

“Thank God that is not the whole story. Even at the worst of times, a faithful remnant has dared to challenge the status quo by living like Jesus.”

Challenging the status quo involves confronting the hatred, bitterness and greed in our world with the love of Jesus Christ that dwells within us. This means we must let Jesus be Lord of our lives. As Lord of our lives the Miracle of Christmas will then be free to work in us and through us each and every one of the days of our lives.

Yours in Christ,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Larry". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long, sweeping underline that extends to the right.

Larry Rice