

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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I Will Ride With You

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” – Luke 2:1-20

A few years ago, a mentally ill man with a long history of family violence entered a café in Sydney, Australia, brandished a weapon and took eighteen people hostage for sixteen hours. The hostage-taker hung a black jihadi flag in the window during the siege and demanded authorities provide an ISIS flag. Almost as soon as the news broke, anti-Muslim messages were circulating on social media.

Nearly a thousand kilometres away, in Brisbane, a female passenger riding a bus read some of these hateful messages on her phone. Disgusted by the way people stereotyped all Muslims as violent, when in fact the vast majority of Muslims repeatedly condemn these attacks, she put the phone down, and looked around. She noticed another passenger, a woman wearing a head covering, a Hijab, deeply absorbed in something on her phone. Whatever she read on her phone clearly terrified this obviously Muslim woman, and she quickly snatched her Hijab from her head.

The first passenger guessed that the Muslim woman had just read one of these hostile messages and was terrified by the prospect of an anti-Muslim backlash to the terrorist attack. It may be hard for us who are part of a majority community, and especially for males, to understand the fear and sense of vulnerability felt by minorities, especially minority women, but the danger is real, and this woman clearly felt it.

But instead, something quite beautiful happened. The first passenger approached the Muslim woman and offered to sit with her and to walk her home. Her offer was gratefully accepted. She then posted a message on social media telling about the encounter. That led others to offer to accompany Muslims riding alone on public transit using the Twitter hashtag #Illridewithyou. Within a few days more than 150,000 people had posted “I’ll ride with you.” People who shared this message were saying to those who might have otherwise felt threatened, “you are not alone; I’ll stand beside you; I’ll ride with you.”

I mention that this evening because it seems to me that “I’ll ride with you” is a nearly perfect expression of the good news sung by the angels in the Christmas story.

The good news of Christmas is that in Jesus, God has not just offered to ride with us, not just tweeted about it, but actually entered our reality, shared our life, and lived our struggle, right to the last agonized breath, living with us, dying for us. The traditional word is Emmanuel, which in Greek means “God With Us.”

The Christmas story ends with Mary and the shepherds wondering what the meaning of all this has been. What is the true meaning of Christmas? It is a question encouraged by the story itself, a question to which the story provides clues.

The story mentions three times that Jesus was laid in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. When something is repeated three times, it is a sign that that is a significant detail, something that we are not supposed to miss. A baby laid in a feeding trough? Why is that important?

It is important, as interpreters of every age have observed, because to lay your child in a feeding trough is something only desperate people would do. They were, after all, travelers who couldn’t find a place to stay. I remember a night more than thirty years ago, when I was travelling around South America. It was late at night, long after dark. I got off a bus in a city in Columbia without a hotel reservation. Today, it would be easy enough to go online and find a place to stay, but then, all I had was a list of cheap hotels in my guidebook. I trudged with my backpack to one after another only to find that they were all full or closed. Finally, I found one that was open and willing to rent me a room. It was pretty basic: four concrete block walls with peeling paint, a mattress on a bare concrete floor, a communal bathroom, and most important, a door with a lock. They would rent it to me, it turned out, for the whole night, or by the hour. “The whole night would be fine,” I said. The place made me nervous, but I was desperate. Every possession I had was in my pack or my money belt. I was not confident about surviving the night without getting mugged. I would have taken a closet at that point, or a cattle stall. Anything with a door, where I could relax and sleep without having to keep one eye half open.

Being without a place to lay your head makes you a little desperate. Being without a place to lay your newborn baby is horrifying. Imagine that feeding trough, for a moment, not the romantic manger of so many Christmas pageants, with sweet-smelling hay and toilet-trained animals. Imagine a manger in a place where real

animals lived, where real animals slobbered and pissed and shat. I doubt that it was very sweet-smelling, that place. I doubt it was very hygienic. It was a crappy place to have a baby, and when I say “crappy,” I mean that quite literally.

You don't have to take this story as a historical account, to appreciate the meaning here. This was not a baby born in a palace or even a middle-class suburb. When God decided to ride with us, he chose to accompany us in the most difficult of experiences. He entered human life in poverty, to a homeless family, to a family without a safe place to lay their heads. God rides with us when we are at our most vulnerable.

And in case we still don't get it, the angel made it really clear to the shepherds: *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: This birth is good news for all: not just for some, but for all, for the shepherds as well as the kings, for the homeless as well as those living in mansions, for the most impoverished as well as for the most wealthy. And because it is good news for all, it is good news for you, for you personally, for you, whether you understand it or not, whether you believe it or not, whether you came here tonight willingly or because someone guilted you into it: For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you, that the baby will be wrapped in swaddling bands and lying in a manger. This good news is for you.*

For this is the most democratic of news, that it isn't only some of us who are important, it isn't only some of us who measure up, it isn't only some of us who fall within the scope of God's love and care. The Saviour has come for us all, for you and for me, to save us from the assumption, as common now as it was then, that only some of us matter to God, that only some of us matter at all.

For it remains true that there are many who live without grace, who live in dis-grace, who get the message over and over again that they don't matter. And so, just as much now as then, we need to be reminded that the good news is for us all, the fat ones and the thin ones, the ones who failed at school and the ones who thrived, the dark skinned as much as the light skinned, the poor and the rich, the plain as much as the beautiful. Because even if you are beautiful in the world's eyes, even if you are rich and smart and successful, in a world where only some matter, we all live with the anxiety that we don't. Even those who are currently the King of the Castle live with the nagging anxiety that they will be knocked off the top of the heap one day. Because if our worth depends on our being on top of the heap, one day we will be off the top, lying on our deathbed, and then what? What does our worth depend on then?

In a world in which only some matter, the anxiety that we don't matter poisons all our lives. That anxiety is quite literally deadly, in many different ways. There is a personal anxiety that contributes to the suicides of those overwhelmed by a sense of failure. There is the religious anxiety that contributes to the brutality of ISIL and Al Qaeda and the fanatics who attack anybody, even children, who are not a part of their own inbred group. There is the anxiety of men that breeds violence against women and girls. There is the economic anxiety which leads us to sacrifice environmental sustainability for our current excess. Our anxiety is also exploited by governments who manipulate us through fear of terror or crime. The anxiety that if we aren't on top, we won't matter, is deadly in so many ways.

What is the true meaning of Christmas? The song that we will sing in a moment puts it very well: on this holy night, "he appeared and the soul felt its worth." When we really accept that the good news is for all, and that it is for you, then you feel the worth of your soul, and are relieved from the anxiety that maybe your soul isn't worth anything. You are released from the restless effort to prove your own worth.

And that means that the good news for all is saving news, news that saves us – if we take it in and live from it – saves us from anxiety and fear, from arrogance and isolation, from injustice and violence and oppression. It is good news that can save you and save me to live less anxious and therefore more joyful lives, more loving and compassionate lives. It is the good news that God will ride with us, at our most vulnerable. It is the good news that God rides with us on this journey of life, from our first squalling breath, to our last labored one. It is the good news that God will ride with us, when we feel the most worthless.

And because that good news is for all, it also saves us, not just from something, but it saves us for something. It saves us for compassion and community. For when we are saved from anxiety, we are able to be present to each other in new and beautiful ways. When we are liberated from anxiety, we are free to ride with one another, especially with those who are at their most vulnerable. And so the good news for all sets us free to be a community of love, support and encouragement. And that is good news for you, good news for all, good news of great joy. Amen.