

# “Bedlam in Bethlehem – The Dawn of Peace”

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Isaiah 55; Luke 1:78-79

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In England about 500 years ago there was a group of monks who were called the *Order of the Star of Bethlehem*. These monks devoted themselves to the care of those who were mentally ill. They established a hospital known as the Bethlehem Hospital. Eventually this name was shortened to ‘Bedlam’ Hospital. As a result, the word *bedlam* came to mean uproar and confusion.

Yet ‘bedlam’ came from the word ‘Bethlehem’! Interesting, eh? And it’s not that far off the mark. Imagine the bedlam in Bethlehem over 2000 years ago when Mary and Joseph travelled there along with so many others for the census. Imagine Mary’s fear at giving birth for the first time, far from home and not even finding an inn, let alone a decent inn, and having to settle for a stable (or likely a cave) that sheltered the animals. Imagine Joseph’s anxiety and confusion. His role was to protect and to provide, and there was nothing he could do.

If you have internet take a look at this amusing children’s version of bedlam in Bethlehem: <https://youtu.be/M2PP1Ey3NEk>

That’s not real chaos, that’s just plain cute - - and we do like to romanticize the first Christmas scenes. We will be doing that here too in 2 weeks’ time when the children will perform a “Musical Manger Mystery”. We could all use a little lightness in our lives, so I’m all for it, but we do need to remember that Jesus was not born into a cutesy, romantic scene, but in a real place with very real problems.

We talked about Zachariah and Elizabeth last Sunday, the parents of John the Baptist who was born to prepare the way for Jesus.



When a baby boy is born, he is brought to the temple to be named and circumcised. Zachariah, who has not been able to speak a word since the angel announced the pregnancy of Elizabeth, speaks for the first time to declare to all gathered that the baby’s name is John. At that point Zachariah is filled with the Holy Spirit and he begins to prophesy. It begins: *Blessed be the*

*Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favourably on his people and*

redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty Saviour for us in the house of his servant David...



*"By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."* (Luke 1:78-79)

Some of you have been around churches long enough to perhaps remember the King James Version of this text: "Through the tender mercy of our God; whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us, To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way

*of peace."*

Whenever you have heard Jesus referred to as the "dayspring" it comes from that verse in Zachariah's prophecy. The purpose of this 'visit from on high' is to bring light to the darkness and to guide us in the way of peace. This was so very needed at that time.

By the time of the writing of Luke's Gospel, where most of the Christmas story is told -- the Romans have destroyed the Jerusalem Temple, and news about Jesus has begun to spread beyond Palestine to pockets around the Roman Empire. In that context, no less than in the decades earlier when Mary was preparing to give birth to her son, the message of God's peace comes to a world more practiced in the art of warfare than in the craft of reconciliation (see Luke 19:42). God's peace stands in striking contrast to the 'peace' of the Roman Caesars, during whose armed occupation John and Jesus are both born and executed.

Where are the shadows in your life? Where do you need to feel that light and the peace of Christ?

The prophet Isaiah says: "Those who walked in darkness have seen a great light." The birth of Jesus allows for light to shine in the parts of our lives that are dark or difficult.

In preparation for Christmas we light the advent candles, and today we lit the candle of peace. Hope, peace, joy, love ... the four elements of Christmas, the four gifts that Jesus brings to the world and offers to us because they are so absent in our world and in our lives.

Let me tell you, this season doesn't have a lot of peace in it for me. Early this week I was thinking that I'm the last person who should be speaking about Peace. I could tell you a lot more about anxiety than peace, but I know I need peace. I bet you do too.

I want to tell you a story remembered by a man named Brian Abel Ragen. His father told him this story over and over when he was growing up. It's a bit of a strange story, it's not a true story, but it is a story that contains truth.

"Once upon a time there was a little boy who was very poor. His widowed mother struggled to make ends meet. The little boy had only one toy - a sad little car in awful condition. It had only one window and two wheels. The roof was smashed in. But the boy loved that car.

It was almost Christmas and the boy knew there would be no presents. But he was excited anyway. It was the first year he would be allowed to go to midnight mass on Christmas Eve. He couldn't wait. He knew that, before mass began people brought gifts to the Christ child. He had been told the gifts were magnificent jeweled chalices for the altar, new clothes for poor children like himself, and envelopes full of money.

The little boy wanted very much to give the Christ child a present. And so he set out to earn enough money shoveling snow before Christmas to do just that. On the afternoon of Christmas Eve, he sat at the kitchen table counting out what he had earned. He had enough money to buy a fine present for the Christ child. But before he could put the money back in his pocket, his mother returned home. "Oh, son," she said, "What a good boy you are! Now we can have a real Christmas dinner!" And she scooped up the money and hurried off to get to the market before it closed. The little boy was heartbroken. What was he going to do now? You've already guessed, haven't you? On his dresser he saw his broken toy car. He knew it was the only thing he had to give the Christ child, so he put the car in his pocket and set off for mass.

When he arrived the church was filling up. He walked timidly to the manger scene which was set up before one of the side altars. Magnificent gifts were already piled up before the Christ child. The little boy laid his broken toy car amid all the treasures. He squeezed into a pew close by just as the organ began playing the prelude.

About this time one of the ushers took a last look at the manger scene to see if everything was in place. Suddenly he spied the car. "Who would leave a piece of trash like this at Our Lord's crib?" he said loudly enough for the boy to hear. The usher picked up the toy car and threw it

across the church. The little boy was crushed. There was no time for him to retrieve his gift. The organ was playing and the procession had begun.

Then suddenly, everything came to a dead stop. To the amazement of everyone present, the baby in the manger came to life and crawled across the stone floor. He crawled until he reached the broken car. Then carefully he tucked it under his arm and crawled back to the manger. By this time all the people had fallen to their knees. The priest rose and approached the manger. There, just as before, was a plaster child with a halo, but now he smiled and his arms were folded tight around a broken toy car."

That's the end of the story Brian's father told him.

Brian Abel Ragen says that he cannot remember how he reacted to the story as a child. He suspected that his father told it to manipulate him. Why can't you be a good little boy like the boy in the story? Brian hated his father, who was an alcoholic, and when he wasn't passed out drunk, he was a foul-mouthed terror. He took his son to mass every Sunday and to confession the afternoon before. But Ragen had no respect for him. "I was afraid of him," he says, "and I despised him. I hated the idea that the ogre who darkened my life would be forgiven week after week."

But years later something changed. It wasn't that his father was transformed and everyone was reconciled in a tearful family reunion. Real-life stories are rarely that tidy. "As I think of my father's Christmas story now," says the grown-up boy, "I realize that I cast him in the wrong role. My father was not the good little boy who gave his last plaything to the Lord. My father was the smashed car with a couple of wheels missing.

Whatever had happened in his life, it was enough to break him. He was a wreck. But despite -- or because of -- all this, he clearly longed to be cradled in his Saviour's arms, to have Christ still seek him after he had been rejected by everyone else."<sup>i</sup>

In one sense, that fable really is a true story. I do believe that God sent his son to the world because it was the only way to reach those who were wrecked, those who were hurting; those who didn't feel like they had any reason to celebrate.

Real life is not tidy. Sometimes I'm glad it is not - - I'm not sure we'd feel the depth of God's love without the depth of some of our pain. It really is the darkness that makes us see and appreciate the light.

Coming in to the church, you were all given a candle. I would like to invite you to come forward and light a candle and place it in the sand. You may light a candle as a prayer for yourself or for someone you are concerned for. Perhaps your candle will be lit in memory of someone no

longer sharing your Christmas. And maybe the light will bring you just a little bit more peace—just a little bit more peace and serenity—just a little bit more real joy and love. I pray it will. Thanks be to God.

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<sup>i</sup> Adapted from, “Matthew and the Matchbox Car,” by the Rev. Barbara K. Lundblad, Day 1, 1996. <http://www.day1.net/index.php5?view=transcripts&tid=445>.