

“Salvation from the margins”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 24, 2018
Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Here we are again. Nestled in the warmth and love of this sanctuary, waiting for the Christ child to be born. Most of us have heard the story before; we’ve sung the same carols, lit the same candles, and—knowing Presbyterians—sat in the same pews. There is comfort in the familiarity of this moment. But I wonder: do we know the story of Christmas as well as we think? Will we recognize Jesus when he is born?

The residents of Davidson, North Carolina, didn’t.

When St. Alban’s Episcopal Church installed a statue of Jesus depicted as a homeless man sleeping on a park bench in front of its church in the affluent suburban area, one woman called the cops, worried that an actual homeless person had gotten into their community.

That’s right. She called the cops on Jesus.

To be fair, it’s hard to know that the statue is Jesus. And that’s sort of the point. The statue shows a person huddled under a blanket, which completely covers his face. The holes in his uncovered feet, from where they nailed him to the cross, are the only sign of his identity.

Neighbors weren’t happy. One man wrote a letter to the local newspaper about how the statue “creeped” him out. Others voiced concern that the statue was an offense to God and to their community. That’s not *my* Jesus, they said; my savior isn’t homeless.

The statue was an honest depiction of the itinerant preacher who, in Matthew 25, says that he *is* the homeless man on the street, or the sick person in the hospital, or the hungry woman in line at the soup kitchen, or the man in prison: “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these... you did it to me” (25:40).

But when Jesus showed up, the residents of Davidson didn’t recognize him.

And that’s the true story of Christmas. While shepherds came to worship the child, the leaders of Judea slept in their beds, far from the manger, unable to imagine that such a child as this would become their savior. Not a mighty king or warrior. Not a high priest or learned scribe. Not a master of land or wealth. But a baby born in the feeding trough of a peasant’s home. The child of an unwed teenage mother. Born on the rural outskirts of society. A baby who’d grow up to be a working-class kind of guy who broke all the rules, espoused all the wrong ideas, and hung out with all the wrong people. An outcast, a “sinner”—by their eyes—whose ministry and teachings

would eventually lead him to an ugly death outside the city gates, on Golgotha in what some scholars believe to be the local garbage dump.

Jesus is born on the margins, lives on the margins, and dies on the margins. This was Jesus' offense. It wasn't that the Son of God cared for the homeless; it was that he himself was homeless.

The leaders of Judea had no objections to Jesus' compassion. They knew the Law of God; it commanded them to be compassionate, to be charitable. It told them to care for the widow and the orphan, the stranger and the poor. They were happy to toss some coins, to offer their prayers and their teachings. And if Jesus had stopped there, they might have followed him.

But Jesus didn't stop there. He ate with these people. He lived and worked with them. They were his friends, his disciples; he loved them. He was one of them. And he taught that they were the children of God—that God's salvation came through them. Not through the learned priests or the powerful families but through the very people those priests and families had discarded.

For centuries these leaders had been telling a story of salvation, and it started in the center, with them, with the chosen ones, and moved out to the margins. Jesus threatened to turn this story on its head. His teachings, his life, his very birth testified that salvation doesn't travel *to* the margins; it comes *from* the margins.

Over 2,000 years later, how often do we make the same mistake?

As John Frye writes, "We often expect that Jesus left his suburban bungalow on the green hillside of Galilee and went into the big city and sought out the disadvantaged. How good of Jesus to condescend and go to the marginalized, the outcasts, the rejects, the down-trodden. What a model of servant leadership." Like yesterday, for example, when a large group of us left the comfort and warmth of this beautiful sanctuary to serve food at the Salvation Army. Just like Jesus, we think, patting ourselves on the back for our goodness.

"Yet, wait a minute," Frye reminds us, "Jesus, himself, was born into and lived in the shadowy margins of his society." So, when I eat with a man at the Salvation Army, I am not Jesus. The man I sit with is Jesus.

Tonight, Jesus is born somewhere on a park bench, or under a bridge, on all the margins of society, among the people cast out and forgotten. He is being born in prisons, and orphanages, and as rockets fly over Gaza, and in a caravan of Guatemalans being teargassed, and in a woman lying on a gurney in the hospital or lying restless in a nursing home. He is being born wherever there is suffering. Not as an outsider come to rescue them, but as one of them.

Yesterday, we gave food to Jesus at the Salvation Army. That's why Susan Marteney and her team worked so hard to make it special—because this wasn't charity; this was a royal dinner, a feast for Christ.

Earlier this week, I sat with Jesus in a young transgender man who had been hurt by the church and he brightened my life with his trust; I felt Jesus' arms wrap around me as a child gave me a hug; I watched, inspired, as Linda MacKay tended to Jesus in a woman having a panic attack. This month, we handed out Christmas presents, and personal care items, and warm coats, to Jesus. For all we know, he's here right now, in someone hurting, someone in need, someone whose voice has been silenced.

And when we realize this, it changes everything. It's so easy to get frustrated and tired, to despair over all the world's needs, to judge this person or that. It's so easy because we think we are Jesus; we're the ones helping, and they're the ones taking. But when we hear the Christmas story right, we come to understand that we are the recipients. They give us Jesus. We should run to these people, these moments.

What's more, we should accept and embrace the margins in our own lives. None of us is perfect. We all have needs, thirsts, wounds. What a relief to let down our masks, take off our armor, no longer pretending to be strong. To realize that Jesus can't reach us through our pretended strength; there's no room. It's only on the margins of our lives, of our society—the wounded places—that Jesus can enter. Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "There is a crack in every thing God has made." Years later, Leonard Cohen added, "That's how the light gets in."

In other words, God doesn't save us where we're strong; God saves us, God loves us, where we are vulnerable.

What would you give if you could meet Jesus tonight? If you could hold that precious child in your arms? If you could walk with him on the lakeshore and go fishing for men? If you could feel his hands on your feet, washing them? If you could stand in that light, that love, that life-changing, hope-giving presence? If you could be saved?

It's all possible. But don't look under the Christmas tree or in your creche or to this pulpit or to the halls of power and wealth or to the strong places at the center. Look to the margins. To your own and to your neighbor's. The Jesus you meet there—the Jesus born there—will not be what you expect. He will challenge you, frustrate you. He will make you want to abandon him, maybe even destroy him. But if you let him, he will love you, he will save you—from the margins.

The community of Davidson may not have recognized Jesus when he showed up, but since its debut, that statue has drawn supporters, including Pope Francis himself. People now sit on the bench beside Jesus, lying there, so cold, and place their hand on his bronze feet, and pray. They touch his scarred, homeless feet, and they feel warmer than they have ever felt before. More loved than ever before. Because remember, "There is a crack in every thing God has made... That's how the light gets in." **Amen.**