



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 24, 2016
CHRISTMAS EVE

Completely Forever:
Changed by the Coming of Christ
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

We are grateful to Bo Browder for reciting Luke's version of the birth of Jesus for us. Most of you know that Bo recently participated in the Imperial Centre production of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* in which he played Linus Van Pelt. We all love that particular scene in the story when rehearsal for the annual Christmas program is falling apart, everyone is mad at one another, and Charlie Brown is ready to give up. Linus walks to center stage, asks for light, and recites the Christmas story from Luke's Gospel. I remember years ago when we were planning a Christmas Eve service and Barbara Biggs suggested that we have a young person read Luke 2 as Linus does in the television movie. She did not have to remind us that a child's voice, pure and void of drama, fits the story perfectly. Thus we began the tradition of having one of our children read the Gospel lesson on this night. It has been a good thing to do.

Like most of us, Jason Soroski, a pastor and writer, grew up watching the *Charlie Brown Christmas* program and still does as an adult. A year ago when he was watching his favorite holiday movie, he saw something he had never noticed before. Linus takes the stage and begins speaking as the spotlight encircles him. He is dressed as he always is in black pants and an orange shirt. He wears a green toboggan on his head and in his left hand, as always, is his blue blanket. He begins the familiar story, "And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night." He tells about the angel of the Lord suddenly appearing and how frightened the shepherds were. Just when he says, "And the angel said unto them, 'Fear not!'", Linus drops his blanket.¹

This is not just any blanket. This is Linus' security blanket, the blanket he carries with him everywhere, the blanket his friends tease him about, the blanket Snoopy tries to steal away, the blanket that gives Linus comfort and

¹Jason Soroski, "Just Drop the Blanket: The Moment You Never Noticed in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*," *crosswalk.com*," (December 14, 2015); available online at: <http://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/just-drop-the-blanket-the-moment-you-never-noticed-in-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>.

confidence. He drops the blanket the moment he says, "Fear not!" Jason Soroski believes the move is intentional. It is Charles Schultz' way of saying that because of Christ's coming we do not have to be afraid anymore. We can drop whatever else may give us a temporary sense of security because Christ has come and he is our security. He is our hope. His coming changes everything!

A month ago, when we began the season of Advent, I told you about an interview Charlie Rose had with Captain Sully Sullenberger. You remember that Captain Sullenberger and his co-pilot Jeffrey Skiles were hailed as heroes in January 2009 when they safely landed their crippled airplane on the Hudson River, saving the lives of everyone on board.

This past September, Captain Sullenberger talked in detail with Charlie Rose about what happened in the three and a half minutes they had to react to the fact that bird strikes had shut down the engines on the plane. As the interview concluded, Charlie Rose commented about the experience. "It changed your life forever," he observed. Captain Sullenberger replied, "Instantly, completely forever."²

Trauma can change us in an instant. So can good fortune. We look around us. We look into our own lives and we can point to momentous events, both good and bad, that have changed our circumstances in life. Those experiences can also change who we are, for good or ill. We experience a lot of good in our lives. We have the love of family and friends. We have opportunities to learn and grow. We have an abundance of resources available to meet our needs. We are fortunate in so many ways.

We also know that there are certainly plenty of reasons to be afraid. Life can spin in a split second. Illness and family distress, the loss of work and the mounting pressures of debt, the prevalence of unrest and ill will are frightening. God, however, never intended for us to live out of fear. From the beginning, everything humanity would need was provided. From the beginning, God's desire was for us to experience the abundance of life, to live full and complete (John 10:10).

A few days after Rev. Soroski wrote about noticing Linus drop his blanket, he wrote another article in which he admitted that after Linus finished his moving recital of the Christmas story, he picked up his blanket again.

²*The Charlie Rose Show*, September 9, 2016; available online at: www.charlierose.com/videos/29005.

Sometimes it's difficult to let go completely of our temporal security. Sometimes it is hard to let go of our fears.³

What happens next, however, is equally poignant. Linus goes to find Charlie Brown who has attempted to set up his sad little Christmas tree in his yard. It is so scraggly, however, that it cannot stand by itself. Linus wraps his blanket around the base of the tree and gives it support. And, as we know, the other children take some of the decorations from Snoopy's doghouse to transform the sad little tree into a beacon of light and beauty. Lori Hurst Harris reminds us that as he wraps the tree with his blanket, Linus says, "I never thought it was a bad tree, maybe all it needs is a little love!"⁴

What we need, what the world needs, is to be wrapped in love. That love is not necessarily all warm and fuzzy. Sometimes it is difficult and demanding and risky as Jesus himself demonstrated. However, when we allow ourselves to be wrapped in that love and when we wrap others in that love, there is no need to fear.

So long ago, the birth of a baby changed life completely forever for each and every one of us. Just as the pilots of U.S. Airways Flight 1549 had trained for years in order to be prepared for an incident such as the one that sent their airplane hurtling toward the frigid waters of the Hudson, so also prophets and others of God's people had been preparing for the coming of the Messiah. The birth of any baby changes life for her parents, but the birth of Jesus changed life for the world—across space and time!

The angel was right and Linus understood the good tidings of great joy. There is no need to fear. Let go of those things that provide a false sense of security, things like power and money and position. Our true security for life now and for life eternal is in hands of the One who grew up to be the Savior of the world. The hope that is ours, the love with which we treat one another, the joy that enlivens our lives, and the peace which makes us into the people God desires are all changed with the coming of Christ. When Christ is born into our lives, we are changed completely . . . forever. Thanks be to God! Amen.

³Jason Soroski, "Drop the Blanket 2: The Rest of Linus's Story from A Charlie Brown Christmas," *crosswalk.com* (December 21, 2015); available online at: <http://www.crosswalk.com/special-coverage/christmas-and-advent/drop-the-blanket-the-rest-of-linus-s-story-from-a-charlie-brown-christmas.html>.

⁴Lori Hurst Harris, Comments on "Drop the Blanket 2."

December 24, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

As darkness settles around our city, as the busyness and anxiety of the season recede, as all of the worries, excitement, wounds, and triumphs of the year scuttle back to their respective places, we sit in gratitude, O God, for the wonder of what this night means for us. Each of us has walked in some darkness to get here tonight, and we are grateful to be welcomed by the light and warmth of your grace. Each of us has struggled with our particular worries and challenges, and we are relieved to lay them down for a while. Each of us has been bruised by the mood, temper, and brutality our world has experienced this past year, and we are thankful for the balm of peace we feel in this sacred space tonight. Your grace through Jesus Christ has shined upon us all, bringing salvation and renewal of life, and we are grateful, O God.

And now we pray that this light which has shined within us all will radiate back into our world to illumine the darkest corners of life as well as to bring clarity and hope in places where your goodness is already dawning. Grant us the courage to live as Christ taught us, to share your love in simple and helpful ways, to work for justice and to resist oppression, and to remind ourselves daily that the only privilege we truly enjoy is the grace which is offered to all of your children.

On this night and in the morning to follow, when wrapping paper and ribbon are removed to reveal gifts given in love that excite and delight us, listen, O God, for the thanks we offer for the child wrapped in swaddling cloths and love, who brought light and life to us all, and whose salvation is ours now and in the life to come. Amen.