

You Kept the Promise
Reading from the Gospels: Luke 2:1-7; 8-20

Do you ever have the feeling they are trying to pull something over on you? The Charlie Brown Christmas Special pauses for a commercial break and what comes next is nothing short of surreal. The sound of a muscle car engine revving. The image of a piston firing. A flaming exhaust pipe. Gunning it down a straightaway. Drifting a tight corner in slow motion, the tire smoke creating a cloud from which the throttling beast-mobile emerges. And then? One of those sonorous Hollywood voiceover actors they use for post-apocalyptic thrillers intones the promise of H-O-R-S-E-P-O-W-E-R H-E-A-V-E-N, tempting you to pick up a crash helmet and apply for a car loan. Vroom! Vroom!

Is it the new Corvette? The Shelby Mustang? The Dodge Challenger?

It's a Camry ... a CAMRY! Do they seriously think I'm falling for that? Granted, the Toyota Camry is a fine, highly regarded, and mechanically reliable car. In the post-apocalyptic world, the only cars still running will probably be Camrys. How many leather-gloved sports car enthusiasts, stranded on the side of the road when the Jaguar

sputters to a stop, are without hope unless some dude in a Camry stops to take them to get a tow truck?

You love your Camry. When the odometer hits 150,000, you are just starting to break it in. But, let's face it, there's not a single 16-yr.-old on this planet that has a Camry poster on the wall of their bedroom. You'll never hear a 10-yr.-old yelling from the back seat, "Mom! Dad! Look! Ooooh! It's a Camry!" But that's not stopping the advertiser from suggesting you'll be entering Formula One races in your sensible sedan. Truth? If they staged a drag race for Camrys, the only people who'd show up would be accountants and preachers. The few spectators would be the folks who came, not for the race, but for the possibility of having communion and getting their taxes done at the same time.

Muscle car? Who do they think they are fooling? It makes you wonder where else in your world the messaging, the promise, the publicity, the campaign bear little resemblance to truth. I'm not talking about hyperbole. We all tend to exaggerate. "It's the best movie of all time!" Says you. "We were robbed!" Says every fan on the losing side. And speaking of sports, the baseball manager protests, "He was safe by a mile!" A mile? The stadium's just not that big, Sparky. Or, how about

this one? "I've never been so humiliated in my life!" Just wait. No, I'm not talking about exaggeration. I'm talking about intentional deceit, artful obfuscation, the preferred medium of charlatans, politicians, preachers, pundits, and advertisers since the beginning of time. Mark Twain once observed, "Sometimes I wonder whether the world is being run by smart people who are putting us on or by imbeciles who really mean it."

When the commercial spokesperson touts the endorsement of 9 out of 10 doctors, or the corporate spokesperson utters the phrases "In order to better serve our customers..." or "Our first priority...", I don't think I'm being cynical to say it would be wise to treat whatever follows with a dose of skepticism. Likewise, whenever of group of similarly suited men crowd behind a microphone in some capitol rotunda, I'm not nearly as interested in what they say as I am fascinated by the fact that they can say it without cracking up like the friend who can't suppress the giggle when trying to pull off a prank. Again, it was Mark Twain who observed, "There is no distinctly native American criminal class except Congress."

Do you ever have the feeling they are trying to pull something over on you? Surely, throughout its history the church has made itself more than worthy of a healthy dose of skepticism whether we're talking about the motivations for the Crusades or the indulgences of the 16th Century or the justifications and rationalizations it has offered in support of conquest, slavery, Jim Crow laws, or the egregious excesses and political exploits that are nothing short of an anathema to the Jesus who walked and taught in Galilee.

When I enter the pulpit I am keenly aware it was not that long ago when just a few miles south of here another preacher was proclaiming things like, "When you come to Heritage USA, remember to bring your Bible and your VISA card - because the Bible is the Holy Truth, and God doesn't take American Express." Or this: "Why should I apologize because God throws in crystal chandeliers, mahogany floors, and the best construction in the world?"

Oh, how often it seems that someone is trying to pull something over on us. And given the failings of self-proclaimed prophets, priests, preachers, and church institutions, not to mention the inarticulate and

inchoate efforts of fools like me, one would have good reason to question the good news we gather to hear on this night. Is it real?

The prescience of the prophet's promise: "For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." The lyrical pronouncement of the angel choir: "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

But is it real? Could it be true? In a world where truth seems to be the whim of the highest bidder, are the promises of God spoken by ancient prophets and messenger angels worthy of our trust? ... It is not a truth discerned in the halls of power, the centers of commerce, or the fulcrums of style, but there are certainly signs and hints of it to be found in the stories and experiences of individuals and communities who in winter's darkness have been surprised by light and grace.

Craig Barnes is a preacher's kid, but his childhood home was not so much of a place of warmth and love as it was a place that burned

with tension and intolerance. On Mondays, Craig's father would give him and his older brother a Bible verse written out on an index card. They were expected to recite it from memory by dinner on Saturday. Their father would point to them and say something like *Romans 8:28*. If they didn't immediately respond with: *For all things work together for good for those who love God*, they'd have to leave the table. By the time Craig was a teenager he had memorized a lot of the Bible, not out of love for the sacred text but because he didn't want to go hungry on Saturday night.

When Craig was 16, his parents divorced, his mother leaving Long Island for Texas and his father leaving his church and disappearing. His older brother dropped out of college and got a job so Craig could finish high school. They got by. But since they had lived in the church's parsonage, it fell to Craig and his brother to move the family's stuff out of the house. He says, "I just remember boxing up our family's life."

The following Christmas the brothers decided they would go to Texas to visit their mother. They didn't have the money for a bus ticket, so they decided to hitchhike from Long Island to Dallas. By the end of the first day they were somewhere in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley on

Interstate 81, and it was snowing ... hard. So, they weren't seeing many cars. Two hours later a State Trooper pulled up, not to lecture them but to tell them the Interstate had been closed for two hours, and that after attending to an accident, he'd come back and take them to a diner.

So, there they sat by the Interstate in a blizzard, and after months of coping by getting through the crisis of the day, they were sitting together and alone and finally forced to actually talk to one another. The conversation fell silent when Craig lamented that they were basically disposable to the people who were supposed to love them. After a bit, though, Craig's brother, probably smirking, pointed at him and said, *Romans 8:28*. So, there in a blizzard they sat by the interstate quizzing one another on words memorized, but admittedly never pondered.

Barnes says, "At one point, I found myself saying the precious lines of Isaiah 43: "Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have summoned you by name; you are mine. When you pass through the waters, I will be with you ... Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you." By the time those words were uttered, he was weeping.

Craig Barnes is the President of Princeton Theological Seminary, having served long and faithfully in Presbyterian churches in Washington D.C. and Pittsburgh. Recalling Christmas alongside the snowy interstate, Barnes says, “That night, when a passage about the sustaining love of God cast out fear that was too deep for me to even acknowledge, became the turning point in my life.” In the face of challenges, that memory sustains him. He says, “What’s the worst that can happen? Will I be alone, broke, and abandoned? Been there. Will I make humiliating mistakes? I tried hitchhiking on a closed interstate. And at the bottom, I found the relentless love of God who was with me and always will be, no matter how deep the waters.” (Craig Barnes, *Christian Century*) On that winter’s night, he realized, God kept the promise.

The great theologian Karl Barth said, *“The man who is God’s own Word, does not send forth His radiant light from afar, encountering the “darkness” of other men as a king, hero or sage; but the Light that “shines in the darkness” is an **ordinary** man and gives light to **ordinary** people ... The Word of God is where we ourselves are, not where we should perhaps like to be, on one of those heights to which by some luck and strong effort we might attain; He is where we really are.”*

"Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." Is it real? Is it true? It is not a truth discerned in the halls of power, the centers of commerce, or the fulcrums of style, but there are certainly signs and hints of it to be found in the stories and experiences of regular individuals and fledgling communities who in winter's darkness have been surprised by light and grace. Amen.