

THE TENDER MERCY OF OUR GOD

LUKE 1:68-79; PHILIPPIANS 1:3-11

LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH

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Is there more to the story? Or is what we see what we get?

I could be referring to any story.

This week, there was a story that generated a few raised eyebrows here in Alberta: **“Alberta man gets \$287 ticket for drive-thru texting,”** the headline blared. And, if you’re anything like me, your first thought was something like, “well, that sounds pretty harsh for a more or less harmful activity!”

(Given the climate change talks in Paris this week, perhaps the greater transgression was idling along for twenty minutes in a drive thru... Or drinking Tim Hortons coffee!)

Buit \$287?! For catching up on a few messages while lurching slowly along in a long line up?

Well, there was more to the story.

Apparently a traffic officer had observed this individual texting while driving before he ever arrived at Tim Hortons. He was going to pull him over, but when the driver entered the drive thru, he decided to leave him be.

When the texting continued in the lineup, he decided to approach the driver to give him a verbal warning. The driver proceeded to verbally abuse the officer and extend a certain finger to him in the rearview mirror as he was leaving the drive thru where he blindly entered an intersection and drove right out into oncoming traffic.

I'm not sure about you, but once I read the full story I began to feel like the \$287 ticket was richly deserved. 😊

There's more to the story.

What if we move beyond a relatively trivial and amusing story like this?

What if we look at the horrific news emerging out of San Bernardino this week?

Another mass shooting. Another predictable cycle of outrage and horror, of dreary battles between those defending their constitutional right to own weapons and those advocating gun control. Another predictable backlash against Muslims, once it was discovered that the shooters were a "radicalized" couple.

Another example of what has become a familiar response to events like this. A toxic explosion of reactionary, poorly-informed, and simplistic commentary that divides the world neatly into "good people" and "bad people" and calls for the lines to be more vigilantly maintained and policed.

But, of course, there is much that we don't know about this story. We don't know all the factors that caused this couple to choose this deplorable course of action. We don't know what happened in the days and weeks that preceded this. Even those closest to the shooters seem utterly bewildered and astonished that these people that they *thought they knew* could have done such a thing.

Our hearts break and we long for justice. But there is probably more to the story.

Or what about the news this week that there are refugees in Lebanon and Jordan who are "refusing" to come to Canada?

You see! some people respond. *They're not even really refugees, they don't even need our help. How can they be so picky if they're really in such desperate need?!*

But what if some are being faced with the choice of either leaving mothers and fathers and sisters and brothers and coming to Canada or staying together as a family in the harsh conditions they now find themselves? What if the extended family unit is the only security they've known for years and they can't imagine leaving it? What if they are holding out hope for going somewhere in Europe where they can more easily come

home if the war ends? What if some can scarcely imagine flying in an airplane across an ocean and the prospect terrifies them?

What if there is more to the story?

I've picked three stories from the past week. But it could be any story.

The story of a relationship. The story of a conflict between nations.

The story of a conversation with a friend that went sideways. The story of a dispute between squabbling kids.

The story of a political announcement at city hall. The story of a church decision.

The story of a human life.

The story of the cosmos.

What if there is more to the story?

It's pretty easy to keep our analysis of things on a surface level, whether it's the news of the day or the biggest questions we can ask in life—questions about whether or not there is a God and whether or not it matters.

We live in a world where many are content with a kind of "surface reading" of things. The world we live in is one where "A" is followed by "B," where everything has a physical cause, where every human behaviour can be reduced to some combination of genetics and social circumstance.

On this view, there is nothing more to the story than what we can observe and measure and predict. Indeed, it's not even accurate to *call* this life a "story." Life is just a series of events, a bunch of things happening, one after the other.

This is true of those who profess no belief in God and claim to have no use for religion or spirituality, but I think it is also true of Christians sometimes.

Sometimes, it's easy to just go think of life as a bunch of things happening, one after the other. We come to church. We sing, we pray, we listen. We sit, we stand, we give. We eat, we shake a few hands, we go home.

We try to be decent people. We have a vague sense that our lives should look a little more Jesus-y than others.

But, there's nothing really going on beneath the surface, so far as we can tell, much as we might periodically try to convince ourselves there is.

Prayers go unanswered. Hopes go unrealized. Christmases and Easters come and go with all their breathless language about newness and hope, which are then followed by a lot of ordinary oldness.

Expectations shrink and shrivel.

And it becomes easy to skip along across the surface of life, rarely wondering if there's more to it all than we see.

But there are moments.

Moments when, no matter what our "official" view of the world might be, we know that there has to be more to the story.

The surface reading of life doesn't satisfy. We long for meaning, for purpose, for hope, for justice, for beauty and truth.

We long for more than a bunch of things happening, one after the other.

I've used this analogy a number of times in conversation with people over the past few weeks.

I have a book in my hands.

Suppose you asked me to describe the book to you. And suppose I began to discuss the texture of the paper and the cardboard. Or the colour patterns on the cover.

Suppose I began to outline a detailed analysis of the chemical composition of the ink that makes the markings on the page or the processes by which light and symbols work together in concert with the optic nerves in my eyes and the visual cortex of my brain.

(You can tell this is hypothetical for such)

Suppose I came up with a thorough and detailed description of this object right down to its molecular structure.

I would have “described” the book. I would have presented you with a list of factually accurate statements.

But I wouldn't have told you *one thing* about what actually mattered to you in asking the question.

What you wanted to know, of course, is what the words on the page *mean*! What story is the book telling? What truth is it exploring? What emotions is it attempting to evoke? What questions does it open up?

In the same way, describing life purely in terms of what we can observe—one thing happening after another—doesn't tell us much about the questions that matter most to us.

Why am I here? Is there hope? Can I be forgiven? Is there a point to this story? Is it going somewhere? Is that somewhere good?

Can God be trusted?

Is there more to the story?

This week I came across a marvelous passage from a collection of Advent writings by the great German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who described our reality like this:

The most profound matter will be revealed to us only when we consider that not only does our world have its time and its hours, but also that our own life has its time and its hour of God, and that ***behind these times of our lives***, traces of God

become visible, that **under our paths are the deepest shafts of eternity, and every step brings back a quiet echo.**¹

Sometimes, those deep shafts of eternity become visible. Sometimes, God pulls the curtain back and addresses his people and his world more directly.

Sometimes, it becomes clear that there's more to the story.

Our gospel text this morning is one of those beautiful moments in Scripture that loudly proclaims, "THERE IS MORE GOING ON THAN YOU KNOW!"

Zechariah's song from Luke 1 is like a shaft of eternity suddenly breaking the surface appearing to light up our darkness.

God is coming, he says. God has come. God is on the move.

Sometimes, when I read a passage of Scripture, I pay attention to the verbs. The verbs are where the action is. And, in this case, the verbs show us how God is on the move:

- *looked favourably*
- *redeemed*
- *raised up* a mighty Saviour
- *spoke*
- *shown mercy*
- *remembered* his covenant

Zechariah sings of these words in the present tense, even though Jesus has not yet arrived. *God has done* these things.

He also sings about what God *will do*.

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.

How Zechariah's people needed this news, this shaft of eternity breaking up out of the ground!

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 14.

How we need this news, two thousand odd years later.

How we need light for our darkness. How we need to be guided into the way of peace.

How we need this Saviour.

So what is the story behind the story?

I think that the undercurrent running through all of history, the stubborn, deeper meaning behind the long train of observable events and “facts,” the *why* that refuses to be swallowed up by all the whats and whens and wheres, is found in Luke 1:78:

By the tender mercy of our God...

The story of the world is a story of the mercy of God, who remembers his people and who offers salvation.

This is what Christians have always been in the business of proclaiming.

Where others may stall at analyzing the book in terms of the paper and the ink and the contours of the markings, Christians say, ah, yes, all this is true and tells part of the story.

But the ink and the paper, the cardboard and the markings, they are telling us a deeper story of the tender mercy of our God.

It is a long story, true. And sometimes it doesn't feel like it's ever going to arrive at its destination.

Sometimes it feels like there is too much ugly ordinariness, too much violence and confusion, too much sin and sickness, for this story to have anything like a God of mercy behind and beneath, around and within it.

But these shafts of eternity Bonhoeffer speaks about... They resonate so deeply with the things that we long for.

They give expression to our unspoken hopes—hopes that we can barely find words for.

Hopes that we are not forgotten, that we are not alone, that God has not left us to our violence and our sin, that we can be forgiven...

That there is more the story.

And that the story behind the story is one of love.

Speaking of love, I close with Paul's prayer for the church in Philippi:

And this is my prayer, **that your love may overflow** more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

All those divine verbs... They're meant to lead to a human verb. Love.

This is one of the deepest truths that Jesus came to teach us. The source of the freedom we long for is not found in the absence of constraints on individual expression or the presence of certain political conditions. These are important, to be sure, and we must never trivialize them.

But to be truly free, I am convinced, is to learn to love. Without reservation. Without holding back.

Without calculating if the gains will outweigh the losses. Without hedging our bets to make sure that it will be reciprocated.

No, we are to pursue a love that *overflows*, spilling out into the most unlikely places, extending far beyond "reasonable" parameters.

To love like Jesus did, in other words. And in so doing to align our behaviours and attitudes, our motives and our character, our very *lives* with the story behind the story.

The story of the tender mercy of our God. The story of the most determined love the world has ever known, a love that invites us in, from darkness to light, guiding our feet on the path of peace.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

