

Message: Open Arms

The last straw was the broken window.¹

Gwen should have been excited, but she wasn't. Christmas was just a few days away. Gwen should have been excited, but she felt miserable. She was in a bad mood most of the time.

Gwen was a custodian. She had to go to work early on Saturdays. Her work shirt was ugly. Most of all, she hated the work. It was dirty, messy and it seemed like people were always asking her to do things they didn't want to do. You know, “Gwen, clean up this mess!” or “Gwen, put that away.”

One Saturday, things got even worse. She had to clean a room a bunch of kids had used overnight. There was an all-night party for the children of some needy families. They had just left and Gwen was cleaning up.

As she did, she felt a draft. She found a broken window! There were shards of glass everywhere. Gwen sighed, thinking how much work it was going to be. That's when the adult who was in charge of the overnight party came up to her. She said, “One of the children did it. He broke it so he could open the door. I'm really sorry.”² Gwen grabbed a box and began picking up the pieces of glass.

That's when it happened. A small, grubby hand reached through the open window! She looked up and saw a boy about 8 or 9 years old. His expression was defiant.

Gwen yelled, “Hey, get in here!” For some reason, the boy obeyed.

“Did you break the window? I don't even have to ask, do I? What made you do such a stupid thing?”

The boy answered, “My Mom was s'posed to come and get me. But she never came and I wanted back inside, but the door was locked.”

“Didn't anyone ever teach you to knock?”

“I knocked but no one came. It was cold outside.”

¹ Material drawn from *Christianity Today*, UMC General Board of Discipleship (gbod.org) and Scripture

² <https://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/truelifestories/ithappenedtome/wheres-my-christmas-spirit.html?start=2>

"That's no excuse. Breaking a window is wrong." Finishing her lecture, Gwen grabbed the box, turned and walked out of the room, leaving the boy behind.

As Gwen stomped away, she began thinking over what had just happened. She thought about the boy with the defiant face. She thought about the cold wind coming through the broken window. She thought about the boy's thin jacket. Gwen thought about how desperate he must have been to get out of the cold - desperate enough to risk cutting himself on the glass. And she thought about the needy families who had sent their children to the overnight program.

Gwen put the box down and quickly walked back to the door with the broken window. But the boy was gone. She never saw him again.

It's been quite a while since Gwen left that little boy standing in the hallway. Since then, she's grown a lot in her faith. And she's found ways to serve and care for others, like doing volunteer work at a shelter for battered women. Helping others has become very important to her.

Gwen says, "I can't say that my experience with that little boy is the only reason I want to show God's love to others, but I do know the experience taught me a lasting lesson. Until then, I'd spent a lot of time feeling sorry for myself. I felt everybody was always bossing me around. I thought I had no power at all. But I had a lot of power. I had the power to make a boy feel welcome or make him feel unwelcome. I had the power to show Christ's love or reject a child."³

There's a song that begins with these words: 'Innkeeper, do you have room for the child?' The final verse ends with this question: 'Innkeepers all, do you have room for the child?'

If we say we have room for Christ in our life but fail to show love to others, we're only fooling ourselves. In fact, Jesus says that if we reject hurting people, we're really rejecting him (Matthew 25:31-46). We're like the innkeeper, turning away the ones who bring the promise of hope and love. As Gwen says, "I hope I'll always be open to those in need.

³ *Ibid on Gwen's quotes*

I hope I'll always realize that I have power in my life. And I hope I'll always remember to use my power in the right way."

Christmas is a moment of open arms. Just like a person who reaches out to receive a newborn baby, we, who gather on this night, open our arms to welcome Jesus into our lives once again. After all, Jesus offers us a lot: incomparable love and a huge smile, the smile God has for all of creation. Jesus' love and smile is directed at every human being from that manger.

Unfortunately, even on Christmas Eve, there are thousands of people who can't smile back. Some don't seem to see Jesus. Maybe what they experience is Jesus crying, as other babies do around the world. Their experience tonight is pain and sorrow, hunger and thirst, depression and anxiety, loneliness and a desire for numbness. Around the world tonight, there are precious little babies, men, women and young people who are lacking food, shelter, jobs and loved ones. They aren't smiling on Christmas Eve. Yet, in many of those places, with a deep faith they too open their arms to the arriving Jesus.

Isaiah 9:2-7 is a poem full of hope to a people suffering from war, captivity and poverty. God revealed to the prophet that a new day was coming. Christmas Eve is the beginning of that day, a centerpiece of the occasion. Today is the day when the world pauses for a moment to once again hear about the birth of a baby who changes the world. We still hear about wars, hunger, poverty, disease, oppression and injustice. And we may feel powerless in the face of the problems. But we aren't! We're part of the solution. The message of Jesus' birth gives us so much. In Jesus' name, we have built schools, hospitals and homes for those who have no place to be. In Jesus' name, people find work and value in their lives. In Jesus' name, we speak out against injustice, corruption, discrimination, prejudice and evil. Jesus is in the hearts of the innocent, senior citizens, broken families, the terminally ill, the hungry, the lost, and all who follow him.

There is much to celebrate on Christmas Eve. This very special baby gives us the foundation for a message of hope for everyone and all of creation. Jesus is the Messiah. And when the Messiah arrives in our

lives, there’s the promise of freedom for those in bondage, justice on behalf of those who have been wronged, light in a world of darkness, deliverance from those who would oppress and limit us. God loves us, all of us – regardless of our language, color, gender, sexuality or any way we discriminate. God wants to save us.

Luke 2:6 says it simply, “*While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.*” Against all odds, Jesus was born. The Messiah came after hundreds of years waiting. That tells us something important: no one can stop God’s will. No matter what kind of confusion we face as individuals or as a people, God is there. No matter where our path leads in life or what events occur in the world, no one can stop God from bringing redemption. God’s grace is greatest in the gift we receive, once again, tonight. The gift is Jesus.

It’s a God moment. When the time came, God sent a Son, born among us by a woman, born under the conditions of the law so God could redeem us. We’re free to be adopted into God’s family, with complete access to the love, mercy and uncommon grace of God.

All people are invited to become sisters and brothers of Jesus. That’s God’s blessing. So tonight, we open our arms in welcome to all. All are invited to receive the blessings of the one who has arrived. Emmanuel has come. Jesus is Almighty God, Supernatural Counselor, the Everlasting, the Prince of Peace. God with us!

Jesus comes to free us, so we can live without fear. His mission is to make things right with God, bringing justice, hope and peace. His message is good news and bad news: good news for those who long to be set free and bad news for those putting chains on others.

A newborn child disrupts lives in a good way. Jesus disrupted the lives of Mary, Joseph, the shepherds and even the angels. Jesus continues to disrupt lives today. Jesus disrupts the lives of those who live as he lived, the lives of those who share his message, the lives of those who are set free by our labor to overcome evil, injustice, hunger and poverty in the world. All of these lives are changed for the better by the child who was born, wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger on that first Christmas Eve so long ago.

We’re invited to join the chorus of angels singing God’s praise,
***Glory to God in the heavenly heights,
Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.***

Let us pray ...

*Gracious God, to you be the glory and honor on this Christmas!
Disrupt our lives with your goodness, so that we become who you made
us to be. We pray this in name of the one who came to save us, Jesus.
Amen.*

Isaiah 9:2-7 (CEB)

The people walking in darkness have seen a great light.

On those living in a pitch-dark land, light has dawned.

You have made the nation great;
you have increased its joy.

They rejoiced before you as with joy at the harvest,
as those who divide plunder rejoice.

As on the day of Midian, you’ve shattered the yoke that burdened them,
the staff on their shoulders,
and the rod of their oppressor.

Because every boot of the thundering warriors,
and every garment rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for the fire.

A child is born to us, a son is given to us,
and authority will be on his shoulders.

He will be named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.

There will be vast authority and endless peace
for David’s throne and for his kingdom,
establishing and sustaining it
with justice and righteousness
now and forever.

The zeal of the LORD of heavenly forces will do this.

Luke 2:1-20 (CEB)

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. The Lord’s angel stood before them, the Lord’s glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David’s city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, “Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, “Let’s go right now to Bethlehem and see what’s happened. Let’s confirm what the Lord has revealed to us.” They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.