

Embrace the World

12-30-2012

Luke 2:21-35, 39-40

21 On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise him, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he had been conceived. 22 When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), 24 and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons." 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. 27 Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, 28 Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. 30 For my eyes have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared in the sight of all people, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." 33 The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, 35 so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

39 When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Perhaps you feel overwhelmed by your new year's resolutions and can identify with Greg Asimakoupoulos, who wrote:

I have pounds to lose and weights to use
and stacks of books to read.
The basement needs attention and the garden's filled with weeds.
The back deck needs some varnish.
My cracked tooth needs a crown.
I have so much that I need to do
I think I'll go lie down.

But being overwhelmed by what should take place is no reason to simply not to roll up our sleeves and get started. Lying down may mean giving up. So put your pen to paper and come up with that annual "to do" list. Most likely your list will have to do with finances, fitness, family and faith. Hopefully, coming out of this wonderful season of Christmas we all are feeling more inclined to make Christ-like connections by reaching out and touching people the way Jesus did.

May I make a suggestion to your list of new year's resolutions? Hug more often. Did you know there are documented advantages to hugging? First of all, it's healthy. It helps the body's immune system. It can cure depression and reduce stress. It aids sound sleep, it's invigorating, it's rejuvenating, it has no unpleasant side effects. Hugging is nothing less than a miracle drug. What is more, hugging is all natural. It's organic, naturally sweet, has no pesticides, no preservatives, no artificial ingredients, and is 100 percent wholesome. Hugging is practically perfect. There are no batteries to wear out, no periodic checkups, no monthly payments or insurance requirements. The low energy consumption of a hug results in a high energy yield. Still not convinced? Let me add: Hugs are inflation-proof, non-fattening, theft-proof, nontaxable, non-polluting, and of course, fully returnable.

I believe there is something about an embrace that conveys a touch of grace. Jesus challenged his disciples to make their way into the world and love others the way he had loved them. From the start, let me make clear that embracing the world with God's love is not simply accomplished by giving someone a hug, but, it's a start. The kind of friendship and acceptance symbolized by a hug signifies what it takes to win the world with love.

Let me tell about a man who I believe is a world-class "hugger." His parents called him Billy Frank and his wife called him Bill. His face is drawn by gravitational pull of years. The wrinkles on his brow betray a life of hard work and stress. His legs and arms are weak. His hands tremble involuntarily. His voice, once strong, is tired. For most of his 94 years, this man has touched the world by holding before it the Christ of Christmas. Jesus knows the trembling hands that hold on to him with unflinching tenacity. He recognizes his faithful follower's tender touch. He understands that the cause for which he came into our fallen world is the cause to which this frail fellow has committed his life. Since embracing the Savior as a teenager, Bill has carried in his heart a concern for all kinds of people in all kinds of places. Since graduating from Wheaton College, this North Carolinian has walked his walk and talked his talk around the block and across the seas. Yes, William Franklin Graham is a living example of what it means to embrace others with the love of God. In Billy Graham we see an elderly but, nonetheless, enduring hugger of humanity.

As I think about Billy Graham, I'm reminded of that saintly senior citizen in Luke chapter 2 by the name of Simeon. Silver-haired, sun-tanned, certain of his destiny, old man Simeon lives each day for the touch of God upon his life. Although he has a predictable pattern to his routines, at his age, he is past the day of having to do certain things. However, on this particular day, Simeon has no choice. He walks to the Temple, probably relying on his olivewood cane. Something inside has dictated his destination this day. As he arrives in the Temple courts, his godly instincts are rewarded.

Joseph and Mary on this particular day have brought their infant son for the ancient Hebrew rite of dedication. Simeon walks toward them. Upon looking down into that tiny swaddled face, the elderly Jew knew his decades-long wait was ended. Taking the child in his trembling hands, Simeon hugs the infant Savior and holds him against his grateful breast. Don't you just love this picture? Leatherlike wrinkled skin next to new pink baby skin. Flesh on flesh. Promise and fulfillment are together.

Of all the people in the Christmas story, Simeon distinguishes himself as the one person who clearly understood the identity of the Christ child. Recall with me the old man's noteworthy prayer as he cradled the newborn baby: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32).

In the sight of all people, it's obvious to Simeon that the gift of salvation is not intended to be hidden under a tree or put on a shelf in a closet. He understands the heart of God. The Creator was not content to distance himself from a selfish willful race of people. He is God who is determined to come close. Immanuel, God with us. And the "us" of God with us is not just the Jews. Simeon says "all people." And lest we be confused by what he says, he repeats himself with different words. The Messiah is to be a source of light to the Gentiles as well as a source of glory to those who trace their line to Abraham. Both Jewish and non-Jewish people are included here. In other words, everybody. Old, young. Rich, poor. The educated, the naïve. Or, in the words of the song many of us learned to sing in Sunday school, "red and yellow, black and white, they're all precious in his sight." In other words, Simeon is aware that Jesus came into the world to bear the sins of all the world. No wonder he says to Jesus' mother something about a sword piercing her heart. He knew what was in store. He knew what was necessary to purchase the salvation of the world. He knew the price tag was found in the manger.

A pastor and his wife were traveling in Arizona a few days before Christmas. After passing a sign that informed them that they had entered the scenic town of Sedona, they spotted a church half way up the side of a red

mountain. Because the pastor enjoyed touring interesting churches, he asked his wife if she'd mind if they took a brief detour. They drove up the winding road to what turned out to be a small Episcopal chapel. It was overrun by tourists enjoying the million dollar view they discovered from inside the sanctuary. In the basement of the church was a gift shop. The pastor followed his wife into the crowded room filled with religious art representing many nations. Together they marveled at the unique nativity sets from various cultures on the shelves. Especially attracted to one of the crèches, the pastor looked in vain for the price. Upon asking the cashier, he was told that the value of each nativity set was indicated underneath the baby. Sure enough, as the couple examined the miniature figurines from around the world, the cost of each set was found under Jesus.

How appropriate, right? How much the holiday we have just enjoyed is worth, is not in brightly wrapped packages, programs, or parties. It's not in the decorations or traditions. As fascinating as the cast members of the original Christmas pageant are, you won't find the price tag of God's love under Mary or Joseph or the angels, shepherds, or wise men. It's not under Zechariah or Elizabeth or even Simeon. The worth of it all is found only in Jesus. He alone claimed to be the way, the truth, and the life. The way to God, the truth of God, and the only means for experiencing eternal life with God. Yet most people on earth have not heard that claim in a way they can understand. That's why it is essential that the worth of Jesus be disclosed in every language to every person of every age.

I recently came across a poignant anonymous poem I'd like to share with you. It ponders the big question of how the world Christ made and into which he came can willingly embrace the grace he offers. Listen as I read "Jungle Babe."

"Jungle Babe so soft and warm, do you know that Christ was born in a humble dwelling much like yours with bed of grass and smooth dirt floor? Will you know as you get tall He died for you; He died for all? A cruel death, at cruel hands in a time long past, in a distant land. To hear this message, you must roam far from your own jungle home; or will you learn it while you're young in easy words, in your own tongue? Will it be soon that you all know before your loved ones older grow; or will you stay in fear and dread of boa spirits, of those long dead? I wonder, who cares enough to go, to give, or pray that you might know, in written form, in speech and song that Christ loves you--with love so strong?"

The trouble with the way most of us enter into and come out of the Christmas season is that we focus on the baby but overlook the reason for his birth. We think of the message sentimentally and in terms of ourselves. We love the carols. We enjoy the customs. We enjoy what the readings and rituals do to jump-start our personal worship. But for the most part, it is a very private celebration. We include family, close friends, maybe a few neighbors in our parties and gift-exchanges and act as though we are oblivious to the fact that we are those who God has charged with passing out his presence to the world. In the words of "Jungle Babe," the question remains, "who will go, or give, or pray" to spread the Christmas message. In other words, who will become a hugger of humanity?

When Simeon held Jesus in his arms, we were given a picture of God the Father embracing those he delights to call his children. It is a picture of the ultimate hugger of humanity. It's not Billy Graham, after all. It's the Creator Himself. God is not content that Simeon be the only one who symbolizes his love for his world. He calls us all to that task.

The implications of the gospel are clear. You can reach out to a new year and face it without fear. When you've been touched by Christmas, you're ready to embrace a world that remains clueless to what the stable accomplished. When you've been touched by Christmas, it doesn't matter if your hands quiver and quake from living eight or nine decades of life. No matter the struggle, you do what you know in your heart is your call. Crossing the oceans, the tracks, or the street when you've been touched by Christmas--the task demands your all. What part of the world is God calling you to embrace? Perhaps your own neighborhood, your work place, or on your knees.