



MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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"God Outside the Gas Station"

A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church

On December 24th, 2022, from Luke 2:1-20

Around this time of year, I look for stories that illustrate the meaning of Christmas. Sometimes, given the way the world is, I don't find anything truly compelling, but this year a friend of mine named Artie Hartsell who lives in Waynesville, NC shared a story on Facebook that truly moved me. I thank Artie for sharing this story, their deep reflections on it and for giving me permission to share it with you today on Christmas Eve.

They begin the story like this, "Late Saturday night into early Sunday morning, I was driving the 2.5 hours home from my friends' Hanukkah gathering in Charlotte back to Waynesville. At 3 am, I pulled into a gas station to fill my tank and grab something to drink. I finished pumping gas and headed inside, where I passed a young woman - maybe in her mid-twenties wearing a Carhartt-type work jacket with the hood pulled over her head, smoking a cigarette, and shivering in the cold. I greeted her, knowing she might ask me for something.

When she realized I was going to acknowledge her, she timidly asked if I had any cash on me. Truthfully, I said, "I don't, but I will see if I can get some when I check out. If I can't, is there anything else I can get for you inside?" She shook her head "No, I have an EBT card." So, I said, "Ok I hear you. But is there something you want that I can grab that your benefits will not cover." She got a little frustrated, like I didn't understand. "I can grab you whatever you want," I said again. She responded, "What I really need are pre-natal vitamins and a blanket."

Suddenly I realized she was probably 5-7 months pregnant. They don't have the things she needs in a convenience store in this small rural town. No stores were open to get them either. "Okay - let me see if I can get some cash," I said. I grabbed my drink and asked the cashier if I could get cash back. She said "No," but told me where an ATM was. When I walked out to go to the ATM to get cash, the girl was gone.

As a social worker, who has worked with many people in their most difficult moments, so much ran through my mind as I drove home. I thought about the fact it was 25 degrees and would be single digits in a few nights. I thought about the lack of services in the town: there was only one shelter she would be eligible for, but she might have missed the early-afternoon intake period, or it may have been full, or she may have been scared to go there 5 months pregnant.



I thought about all the churches in the area - at least a couple hundred in this town alone. What if they each supported one person at a time to get back on their feet? I thought about the people who vote against public welfare, against healthcare, or criminalize the poor and vulnerable in desperate circumstances. I thought about people who might care more about her if she was walking into a clinic than they do if she's standing outside a store freezing in the cold.

I thought about people who might judge her for smoking, even though it was keeping her warm, or people who might tell her to get a job, even if she already has one. I thought about people who would cast her off without any empathy to the trauma she may have faced in life or any curiosity of how she came to this point. I thought about the people who might pay thousands to adopt this mom's baby before offering her any kind of support, or how child protective services would be on her case without offering any real options. I thought about how many anti-poor laws are being passed, laws preventing people from feeding unhoused or hungry folks in public, or anti-loitering ordinances requiring people to move around continuously, or the destruction of tent cities where people are eking out a precarious life.

I don't know. Seeing her reminded me of a certain young mother named Mary with nowhere to go, living under an oppressive government, hiding from the rulers of the time to keep her baby. I thought about how we increasingly fail to recognize the humanity - and the divinity - in each other; how we fail to recognize God in each other's faces, and how we have become increasingly individualistic, when we're created to be interdependent. Most of us have heard the story the birth of Jesus our whole lives and yet we still can't figure out how to create a place for all the young mothers to be. I hope she gets what she needs. It's going to be 5 degrees on Friday."

The story of the birth of Jesus is a story of God taking on flesh, coming into the world to be with us as Emmanuel so that we might learn what it means to be with each other. Jesus is the one who showed up for everybody—rich and poor, tax collectors, sex workers, and sinners, Pharisees, Sadducees, and Samaritans, Jews and Greek, male and female and non-binary, Roman and Barbarian, even Caesar and his soldiers. Christmas is about the birth of the one who shows up and says, "I am here for everybody. God is here for everybody. Absolutely everybody. And I am here to start a movement of people who love everybody. But in order to love everybody, we're going to have to start at the bottom up and the outside in—outside of Rome and Jerusalem, outside the seats of power, in the small towns like Bethlehem; with the shepherds, the day laborers, and essential workers of the empire, with a poor unknown pregnant teenage girl from Nazareth and her fiancé who never says a word, and with a tiny defenseless little child born in a manger.



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Every Christmas God says to us, "Do you want to join me in a movement of love and peace for everybody, a movement that works to ensure that no one being crushed by the weight of oppression is ever alone outside freezing in the cold, forgotten, and forsaken, a movement that seeks to make a better world where there is no more oppression?" If the answer is yes, then we start by recognizing the humanity and divinity in each other; seeing God in each other's faces, refusing to be indifferent to the plight of our neighbor, and striving to offer our compassion wherever. We start by changing our perspective to ensure that we always see God when she's standing outside the gas station. We start by working from the bottom up and from the outside in, with the people who have been forgotten and forsaken by the empire. We start by continue to work with God build this powerful movement of love and peace for everybody, because if we can do that, then Christmas really will be good news of great joy for all people. Amen and Merry Christmas.