

“Socks and Underwear”      Luke 2:1-20      Christmas Eve 2017

When I was a kid, I loved Christmas. I loved the decorations and lights. I loved the smells of fresh cut trees, electric trains, and baking cookies. I also enjoyed making and buying gifts for my parents, grandparents, and siblings. I loved watching their reactions to my gifts when they opened them. But, if I'm honest, I enjoyed getting gifts at Christmas even more...with a few exceptions. For some reason, both sets of grandparents thought that clothing made a great gift for their first grandchild. Now, sometimes, especially when my grandfathers were involved, they would get me a really nice toy, which I loved. But usually it was clothes, especially socks and underwear and knit hats and scarves. What is it with grandmothers and cold weather? If they feel cold, somehow they assume that everyone else must feel cold, too. Thus- warm socks, underwear, hats, and scarves.

My parents taught me that I needed to be grateful for whatever gift I was given, so I really tried to appreciate these clothing gifts, but inwardly I was always disappointed by them, and quickly set them aside to see what else I'd gotten.

I wonder if my disappointment with socks and underwear can serve as a kind of metaphor for the disappointment that many of us experience with the lives we've been given. Maybe college didn't work out for you, or

you never got the chance to go. Maybe you are bored with your career, or hate your current job. Maybe your marriage hasn't turned out the way you hoped it would, or your children have brought a great deal of pain into your life, or maybe your parents have brought real disappointment and hurt to you. Maybe addictions to substances or to gambling or sexual addictions have clouded your life in ways you never anticipated or desired. Maybe the death of someone close to you has given you a life you never wanted, or the loss of your health as you've gotten older has been very difficult to accept. Perhaps you've even been deeply disappointed by a church or its pastor! Or, maybe you're just feeling stressed this Christmas season over your finances once again.

For many of us, perhaps most of us, life hasn't turned out the way we expected it would, and we're disappointed, maybe even angry or bitter! It's as though we wanted a Red Rider BB gun, but we got socks and underwear!

Surprisingly, the coming of Jesus into the world as the Messiah was also a real disappointment for many of God's people. The prophets had promised them a great king. Instead, Jesus was born to poor people in the humblest of circumstances, and never rose to royalty. They were promised someone who would deliver God's people, Israel, from oppression. So, they expected the Messiah to free them from Roman domination. Instead,

Jesus raised no army, and was executed by the Romans in humiliating fashion. They expected someone who would elevate God's chosen people to prove that God was on their side. Instead, Jesus continually criticized their leaders. They expected someone who would hold people to the highest standards, who would work with the "good people" for the betterment of society. Instead, Jesus hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, and drunkards! It's fair to say that the vast majority of God's people were very disappointed with the Messiah they got!

And yet, even though they didn't get the Messiah they wanted and hoped for, they got the Messiah that they and the rest of us actually needed! Jesus brought salvation not just to the Jewish people, but to everyone, including you and me! Remember what the angel told the shepherds: "*Do not be afraid; for see- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people!*" (Luke 2:10) Good news for all the people! And, Jesus and his followers have impacted the world for good more than any other person in the history of the planet! Frederick Buechner put it like this, "...when the child was born, the whole course of human history was changed. That is a truth as unassailable as any truth. Art, music, literature, Western culture itself with all its institutions and Western man's whole understanding of himself and his world- it is impossible to conceive how differently things would have turned out if that birth had not

happened... And there is a truth beyond that: for millions of people who have lived since, the birth of Jesus made possible not just a new way of understanding life, but a new way of living it.”

In spite of the disappointment and even resentment of God’s people about the kind of Messiah God gave them, it turns out that God knew what he was doing after all. And because Jesus came in the way he did, we can have hope and comfort in the midst of our personal disappointments and hardships today.

A number of years ago, I was sitting in the front row at a church where I was serving, seated next to four year-old Becca. She had a set of crayons and was very engaged in her drawing. At one point, she turned to the woman seated on the other side of her and asked, “What color is God?” The woman replied, “That’s a very good question.” Undeterred, Becca thought for a moment and said, “I think he’s skin-colored,” and confidently completed her picture. Because of Christmas, I am certain that at least in one sense, Becca was right!

Because the Creator of the world, and the Creator of you and me, became skin-colored and lived on the earth, we are confident that God understands our human predicament, with all its stresses and disappointments and uncertainties. Because he experienced them himself! And that knowledge gives us the courage to endure our disappointments,

knowing that the God who made us understands us, and will not abandon us, and can even bring good out of the worst situations. That enables us to accept the reality of our lives, and not get stuck in our disappointment. And that's a good thing, because when we get stuck in our disappointment, we can easily become angry and bitter people, seeing ourselves as little more than victims.

So I ask, "What will you do with your socks and underwear situations?" Christmas presents us with a choice. If we really believe that God became flesh in a far corner of the Roman Empire when Caesar Augustus and King Herod ruled- If we believe that, we can choose to believe that God knows what he is doing with our individual situations, and we can choose a new way to respond. Rather than get bogged down in disappointment and anger, we can choose to trust the God who made us, who became one of us and even died for us. We can choose to trust him with the lives he has given us, believing that he understands us and will work all things out for our good and for the good of our world. We can even choose to give God thanks for the lives we have.

I saw a license plate this week that disturbed me. It simply said, "GODLESS." I wondered what the car owner intended to say with that plate. But, it reminded me that although we may not have a license plate that advertises it, it is still possible to live as though God doesn't exist, or as

though his coming into our world makes no difference in how we live. I hope that's not the case with you. I hope that that Christmas, the story of how our Creator entered human history as a fragile baby, reminds you that God loves you and wants to give you hope in the midst of the ordinary and extraordinary disappointments of life. And it's my prayer that you will trust God to help you live in the light of that hope.