

## **Celebrate Advent and Christmas with Bishop Laurie Haller – Week Five: Christmas Witness**

Grace and peace to you on his most holy of nights.

It was a typical Christmas for our family. For many years, Gary and I and our three children traveled on Christmas Day to visit either my family in Pennsylvania or Gary's family in Florida. We'd arrive home very late from Christmas Eve services, wrap a few last-minute presents, fall into bed exhausted, get the kids up early in the morning, open their stockings, make breakfast, unwrap presents, take down all the ornaments, drag the tree out to the street, pack our suitcases, and rush off to the airport, usually around noon.

It was crazy. It was chaotic. But it worked. Until one time it didn't. We booked a flight to Florida for Christmas Day for our two youngest children. The rest of the flight was full, so we booked tickets on another flight. Unfortunately, that flight was canceled at the last minute, and there were no other flights available for a week. So, on a whim, Gary and I decided to get in our car and started driving from Michigan to Florida without telling anyone: 1,335 miles of driving.

We headed south and spent Christmas on the road, eating dinner in a deserted Chinese restaurant in Indiana and spending Christmas night in a motel in Kentucky. Not a fancy chain, but a dumpy little hole in a wall motel along the highway. And guess who met us when we walked into the lobby late Christmas night? Why, I was Jesus.

Jesus appeared with a whimper. Christmas happened in a seedy motel among ordinary, diverse, hopeless, hopeful, worried, joyful, despairing, kind, lonely people. Nothing special, except God working in secret. Jesus arriving where you'd least expect it.

No one noticing except a rag tag band of shepherds who are stopped in their tracks by an angel, lighting up the sky with glory. "Don't be afraid. I'm here to give you great news, and you're the first ones to hear it! This very night a Savior has been born, the Messiah, the Lord, the One for whom you've longed and waiting. The time has come. But you're also the first ones to see him. Go on over to the motel, out in the back and you'll find a baby lying in a manger. That's the sign." Then all the angels appear and sing a song that is forever imprinted on the hearts of these shepherds. "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." Which, in case you didn't know, is everyone... including you.

This Jesus is God's son, God's gift of pure love to our world and everyone in it. God decided to become one of us. God chose to appear in human form through a tiny, vulnerable, helpless baby. Jesus came to bring hope, grace, possibility, reconciliation, forgiveness, and fullness of life.

Jesus was born into a world that was just as hopeless, conflicted, war-torn and cynical as our world is today. Yet Jesus was not a king. He was not a success by anyone's standards. Nor did he exercise worldly power. No, Jesus chose to transform our world through suffering love. He humbled himself rather than exalt himself. He chose the last seat rather than the place of honor.

Jesus had no home, no place to lay his head, no worldly goods, nothing that had any value. He had no family of his own, never went to college, never traveled more than a few hundred miles from the place he was born. Yet the religious and political powers of the time were threatened by this pure and holy man who changed the course of human history by giving up his life out of love. Every one of us needs to know who this baby Jesus is because Jesus can transform your life.

Whoever you are, Jesus comes to you tonight offering grace and filling you with the courage to embody God's peace in a broken world. Jesus comes to you tonight, inspiring you to

hit the streets and reach out to those who are struggling. Jesus comes to you tonight, nudging you to offer a kind word or a hug to someone whose deepest need is to know that Jesus loves them.

Who is this baby Jesus, anyway? O, rest beside the weary road and hear the angels sing, especially if you're spending Christmas in a motel.