

Love Will Find a Way

Luke 2.1-7

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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Note: This is an expanded version of the meditation delivered on Christmas Day.

Since we have young children here today, I want to acknowledge what most of them have been told by their parents, which is that Santa Claus lives at the North Pole and delivers toys to good children on Christmas Eve. But I'm also going to let everyone here today in on a little secret. Even though there is only one authentic Santa Claus, he has many secret helpers who appear a few weeks before Christmas. They look like him and talk like him and say what Santa would want them to say. In fact, we have at least three of these secret Santa helpers in our church family. I'm not allowed to tell you their real names, because that information is highly confidential, but I will tell you that one of them is here today in disguise. This particular secret Santa helper told me about an event that happened a few weeks ago. He was standing in (or sitting in) for Santa at the Kell House when a little girl came up to him and said very matter-of-factly, "I don't have a chimney." The implication was that Santa would be unable to get in and leave her any presents. Santa's secret helper started to say, "Sweetheart, I'm going to get four of my friends, and we'll have that chimney installed before sunset," but he has been taught

not to over-promise. Instead he said, “Don’t you worry, sweetheart. Santa will get in. You’ll have presents on Christmas morning.” And, of course, she will. Love always finds a way.

It is extraordinary, if you think about it, that Jesus Christ, God’s own incarnate Son, should become a human being and live among us, and that he got here the same way every one of us gets here—by being born. First, God “knit him together in his mother’s womb,” in the words of the Psalmist [Psalm 139.13]. Then he grew up. Jesus had a family—his mother Mary and her husband Joseph—and later there were brothers and sisters. He had a hometown, Nazareth, where he was raised. God could have sent his divine Son to arrive spectacularly from heaven, filling everyone on earth with awe and wonder, instead of just a few local shepherds. But instead, he was born in the most humble of circumstances. Why? So that, even though he was like God, he could also be also like us. On earth, Jesus was part of a family. He learned as he grew. He knew what it meant to love and to be loved. He knew what it meant to be hurt and to be sad. He knew what it meant to have close friends, and to laugh with them and enjoy their fellowship. In the fullness of his humanity, Jesus had a body, as do we all.

Our bodies are very important. They are the means by which we think and see and hear and touch and walk and talk. Our bodies are what grow inside our mothers’ wombs. Our bodies are what our parents pick up when we are small. Our bodies are what the people who love us hug and hold. Our bodies are what we use to play, to work, to learn, to make. Because we are made in the image of God, our bodies are inherently precious. And when the bodies of people we love very much are no longer near us, we miss them, because we not only want to see them on our computers, or hear them on our phones, we also want to touch them and hold them.

We want their bodies near. Mary loved Jesus always, starting from when he was growing inside her. She loved him as her small child, and she loved him as her grown son. When he was not near her, she missed him, even though she knew he was doing something very important. And even when he died, in front of her eyes, his mother wanted to know where her son's body was laid to rest. After his death and burial, she came to know the infinite joy of his resurrection. Love always finds a way.

Last week, I had the sacred honor of sharing in a service at Arlington National Cemetery for Air Force Major Troy Gilbert, an authentic American hero whose mother and father, Ronnie and Kaye, live in Wichita Falls and are beloved friends. After graduating from Texas Tech, Troy married Ginger, his college sweetheart, and together they had five children. By his twelfth year in the service, he had already had a very honorable career training other young pilots and serving as a logistics officer for Air Force One. In 2006, he volunteered for deployment to Iraq.

On November 27 of that year, an American AH-6 helicopter—nicknamed called “Little Bird”—was shot down twenty miles northwest of Bagdad while on a mission to capture an al-Qaeda leader near Taji. Very soon after, all of the Americans on the ground, some 20 in all, were cut off and surrounded by the forces of Al Qaeda in Iraq, the precursor to ISIS. A fierce onslaught ensued against the outnumbered Americans. As Mark Thompson wrote in TIME magazine¹, “Mortars, RPGs and rounds from antiaircraft guns and AK-47s began raining down. There was no place for the troops to hide.” They were on the verge of being overrun when, flying low over the surrounding hills, Troy roared onto the scene in his F-16,

¹ Mark Thompson, “Bringing a Hero Home,” TIME, December 12, 2016

“much as the cavalry used to ride to the rescue.” He didn’t want to endanger the Americans on the ground or innocent civilians, so he didn’t employ bombs, but instead strafed the attackers. But in order to do so, he had to fly low to the ground. He was able to take out “a truck full of bad guys,” but as he swung back into action, he focused on his second target a second too long, and, at 500 miles per hour, plowed into the ground and was killed instantly. The plane’s engine was thrown nearly a mile. As Thompson wrote, he had “‘padlocked’ onto his targets, so intent on completing his mission that he ignored danger to himself.” By the time the firefight was over, and reinforcements were able to make it to the crash site, Troy’s body was gone. As seen via a video feed from an American drone, al-Qaeda fighters pulled his body from the cockpit, rolled it into a carpet and drove away. By his heroic sacrifice, 34 year old Troy Gilbert—husband, father, son and brother—had saved some twenty of his fellow Americans without the loss of innocent lives. But al-Qaeda had the trophy of an American pilot’s body, which it used in grisly propaganda videos.

It is a core commitment of the American military that it leaves no one behind, neither living nor dead, and so, even after a funeral at Arlington National Cemetery, in which some small fragments of DNA retrieved from the cockpit were interred, the search continued for Troy’s body. Though there was no question that his soul was safely in God’s heavenly kingdom, among the communion of saints, his body—the precious body which had been knit together in his mother’s womb, and carried in his father’s arms, and united with his beloved wife to produce five precious children knit together in their mother’s womb—that body was far away, in the possession of cruel enemies in an alien land.

In Christian tradition, there are seven cardinal virtues. Six of them are from Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 25: to feed the hungry, to give drink the thirsty, to

clothe the naked, to care for the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to welcome the stranger. Jesus taught his disciples that when we do these things for others, it is as if we are doing them for him. The seventh cardinal virtue is to bury the dead, as Jesus himself was reverently laid to rest by those who loved him. In Jewish tradition, burial of the dead is the greatest act of kindness, since it is the only one the recipient can never repay.

Drew Gilpin Faust, the president of Harvard and a noted historian, wrote in *This Republic of Suffering : Death and the American Civil War*,

Soldiers paid homage to their dead comrades out of respect for the slain men, endeavoring to reclaim the individual...from the impersonal and overwhelming carnage. But they also did it for themselves: to reassert their own commitment to the sanctity of human life and the integrity of the human self. They were reaffirming the larger purposes of their own existence and survival and hoping that if they were killed others would similarly honor them.

American forces were officially withdrawn from Iraq in 2011, and his family was notified that the search was over. His sister Rhonda recalled that they were told, “He has been accounted for, we have his remains, he has been identified, and he has been buried with honors at Arlington National Cemetery. So there is nothing more to do—the case is closed.” But the al-Qaeda videos still in circulation proved otherwise. For all manner of reasons: the love of his family, the devotion of his brothers-and sisters-in-arms, the honor of his country—it was essential that the stolen body (and not simply a minuscule fragment) of the last remaining American MIA in either Iraq or Afghanistan be brought home.

The family appealed to Congressman Mac Thornberry, who now chairs the House Armed Services Committee. They told him that no one would listen to them.

Congressman Thornberry responded, “They’ll listen to me.” As Troy’s mother Kaye said, “As a mother, I carried the whole man inside of me. I raised the whole man for 17 years. And he was a whole man when the Air Force took him to Iraq. I wanted a whole man back.” The search was re-opened.

Unfortunately, Troy’s body was being moved by al-Qaeda from grave to grave. An Iraqi gave a few small toe bones to the Jordanian embassy in Bagdad, which turned them over to the Americans. DNA tests proved they were Troy’s, and they were also laid to rest in Arlington in 2013. But that small discovery led to a “wild-goose chase,” in which American searchers were led from false grave to false grave over the next nine months.

When American forces returned to Iraq to share in the fight against ISIS, one local shared an important piece of information. He revealed that a tribal chieftain in Anbar province claimed to be the latest custodian of Troy’s body. NCIS made a discrete visit to find out the truth of the claim, and a piece of jawbone confirmed it. Ultimately, a 29 member task force, including members of the same unit Troy had died defending, descended upon the chieftain's domain, and effectively advised him that they were not leaving without their brother’s body. They were taken to the grave, where they found him, still in his flight suit and shrouded in a parachute. They brought their brother home. Love always finds a way.

The service in Arlington on December 19 was deeply moving. A four star general paid tribute, a country music singer sang, a renowned actor was in attendance, and Ginger gave a moving tribute to her late husband. Mac and Sally Thornberry were there, as was the Secretary of the Air Force and other dignitaries. I was asked to do the opening invocation. This is the prayer that was offered:

*O loving and gracious God,
our heavenly Father,*

*we thank you for the life
of your beloved Troy.
You knit him together in his mother's womb.
There was no place, there was no time,
when he was outside of your sight,
or beyond your love.
We praise you for the gifts and graces
you imparted to him;
for the gracious lessons
learned from his mother and father;
for the devotion of his sister;
for the high, holy love of his wife
and for the precious children
they brought into the world together;
for his steadfast love of country,
and his allegiance to his brothers and sisters in arms,
even to the point of death.
We honor you for the lives he saved,
even at the cost of his own,
and for the diligent courage
which brought him home at last
to his native soil, the land he loved.
And we glorify you for his life everlasting,
in the name of Jesus Christ,
his Lord and ever-living Savior.
Amen.*

After I sat down, someone touched my shoulder and I turned to see a young officer who held out his hand and whispered some gracious words. I glanced at his shoulder and saw two stars. It occurred to me at that moment that I must be getting very old if I thought a major general looked like a young junior officer. After the service, we walked behind the casket for two miles to Troy's resting place. The caisson was drawn by seven horses mounted by three riders. An honor guard led the way, accompanied by a contingent of the Air Force Band. As we walked, we passed

row upon row of grave markers, many of them adorned with Christmas wreaths. I was powerfully struck by how many graves there must be in Arlington National Cemetery, and how many of America's sons and daughters have made the supreme sacrifice upon the altar of liberty. At the grave, there was a flyover of F-16's in the "lost man" formation, in which one of the jets peeled away and flew upward away from the others. Then the Air Force Chief of Chaplains paid a moving tribute to Troy, and said what I have heard so many others say—that Troy loved the Lord Jesus. The Honor Guard fired a three-volley salute, and then a lone bugler played "Taps." Five American flags were presented to Troy and Ginger's five children. And then, before we were dismissed, I heard, sounding over the hills of Arlington, the echoing report of another three-volley salute. America's sons and daughters are still being laid to rest upon the altar of liberty.

One of the things the chaplain described at graveside was a video of Troy reading to his children. What he read was today's scripture, the story of Jesus' birth. That reading, of course, includes these familiar lines:

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

No room at the inn for Mary and her child? So be it. Give birth in a stable and hallow the manger. No hope to find the body of the son, husband, father, brother, who laid down his life defending his brothers in arms without bringing harm to the innocent? No hope of bringing him back to his native land? Nonsense. America does not abandon her defenders, including those who have fallen. Besides, Christians are forbidden to despair.

In life and in death, love finds a way.

Amen.