

LOVE IN A LUNCH BAG

Luke 2:25-33

October 19, 2008

(CHILDREN'S SABBATH)

The Lord be with you! (And also with you!)

Thank you. I needed that. I need all the help I can get this morning... Which is why I'm so glad the choir sang that wonderful anthem, "Carry the Light." Because there's just something about it... Every time I hear it, it does something to me. It makes me feel like I'm in what the old Irish people would have called a "thin place." A place where the "wall" that separates us from heaven is so thin you can almost see God.

It happens sometimes when the choir sings. Or when the children come and bless us and laugh and sing and remind us that God delights in them -- in *all* of his children. And in all of us. ✠ Those are the "thin places," I think. Where God seems so real and so close you could almost reach out and touch him. And so often when it happens there are children around. ✠

I have a friend, a pastor, who told me a story about a little girl in his church who is four years old. And she was home one night with her father. Just the two of them. And there was a terrible storm that evening. The wind blew. And the lightning flashed and lit up the sky. The thunder roared and rattled the windows there in their house. And the little girl's father was a wee bit concerned, I think. He thought surely the child would be frightened. So he ran up the stairs to check on her, fully expecting to find her in tears, curled up in a tight little ball under the covers, or hunkered down in the hallway (or under the bed) trembling with fear. But when he got to her room she was standing up on the windowsill, leaning spread eagle against the glass with the biggest grin on her face you've ever seen! "Jennifer!" he said. "What are you doing?"

And the lightning flashed and lit up the sky. And the little girl said, “Daddy, daddy! I think God’s trying to take my picture!” ✦ Oh, and why wouldn’t he? Why wouldn’t he? Because God *delights* in his children. And sometimes, even through little children, he reminds us of that -- that *we are all loved with an extraordinary love.*

Thin places, the old Irish folk called them... where God seems so real, so near, you could reach out feel the warmth of his hand, the strength and the tenderness of his presence. *I think his church is one of those places.*

But it isn’t always a church, mind you. Sometimes it’s a classroom, or a bench at the park, or it’s something that happens over the telephone.... For Jennifer’s father it was a storm and a window in his little girl’s room.

And for Robert Fulghum it was a little brown bag. He’s the man, you remember, who *learned everything he ever needed to know in kindergarten.* Or at least, that’s what he said in his book. But it wasn’t true. He admits that now. Because he’s a father. And as any *mother* will you, *fathers* have a lot to learn. And he *did* learn, I think. He learned from his daughter, whose name is Molly. And when Molly was seven, it was her “job” to hand her father his lunch every morning in a brown paper bag as he went off to work. And she did just that. Every morning. He’d finish his breakfast and gather his things (his briefcase and umbrella ... whatever he needed). And Molly would run from the kitchen and bring him his lunch in a little brown bag.

But one morning he finished his coffee, got up from the table and gathered his things. And Molly came running with *two* paper bags. One was his lunch. At least it *looked* like his lunch. And the other was kind of wrinkled, I guess, and torn in places. Held together with duct tape, and staples, and a few paper clips.

When he saw it he said, “Why are there two lunch bags this morning?” And Molly said, “Well, the other one’s something else,” she said. And he said, “What’s in it?” And Molly said, “Oh, just some stuff. You’ll see. Take

it with you,” she said. He was running a little behind already that morning and really didn’t have time to stand there and talk about it. So he grabbed both bags, stuffed them into his briefcase, blew Molly a kiss and ran out the door.

And he didn’t think of it again until lunchtime. He was trying to gobble up a sandwich as quick as he could when he saw the other bag -- with the staples and the duct tape. And he picked it up, tore it open, and emptied the whole thing right there on his desk. There were a couple of hair ribbons and some pebbles, I think. And a plastic dinosaur that had been part of a *Happy Meal*, once. And there was a pencil stub, and a tiny little seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, some lipstick, one small doll, two chocolate kisses, and thirteen pennies.

He looked at it and smiled. And when he finished his lunch, he swept everything off his desk -- leftover lunch, Molly’s junk, the paper bags -- everything. It all went right into the wastebasket. And that was the end of it.

But that evening at home when he was reading the paper, Molly ran up to him. She said, “Where’s my bag?” And her father said, “What bag?” Molly said, “You know, Daddy. The one I gave you this morning.” And he said, “Oh, I left it at the office. Why do you ask?” And she held out a little piece of paper and said, “Cause I forgot to put this note in it. And besides,” she said, “those are *my* things in the sack, Daddy. The ones I really like. I thought you might like to play with them. But they’re not for keeps,” she said. “I want them back.” And then she looked up at him and said, “You didn’t lose the bag did you daddy?”

And he did what any father would do at that point. He perjured himself. Lied through his teeth and said, “Oh, no. Of course not,” he said. “I just forgot to bring it home. I’ll bring it tomorrow.”

And as Molly threw her arms around her father’s neck and hugged him, he unfolded the little note she said she forgot to put in the bag. And it said,

“I love you, daddy.” And that’s when he realized that Molly had given him her treasures. Love in a lunch bag. And he missed it, he thought. He missed it. He didn’t just miss it, he threw it away. Tossed it in the trash! His little girl’s heart!

So he said, “I’ll be right back.” And he hopped in his car, went back to the office, and got there just a few minutes ahead of the night janitor. And he picked up the waste basket and just dumped the whole thing right on his desk. And then, after washing the mustard off the dinosaurs and spraying the whole thing with *Listerine* to kill the smell of the onions, he smoothed out the paper bag, (which he of course had wadded up and shot like a basketball into the can). And he put all the little treasures back inside and carried it gently home, like a wounded kitten. And the bag, of course, didn't look so good, but the stuff was all there and *that's* what mattered.

After dinner that evening, he asked Molly to tell him about the stuff in the sack. And it took a long time to tell. Because everything had a connection to some memory she had, or a dream, or a wish. And *he* had given her the chocolate kisses, she said. And she put them in the bag so she’d have them whenever she needed them.

And it was a thin place, he said -- a holy place. Because he didn’t just feel close to his daughter. But when he looked at Molly that night, he felt close to God -- so close, he said, that he could have reached out and touched him.

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;

I can feel his mighty power and his grace.

I can hear the brush of angels’ wings,

I see glory on each face;

surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Well, in a way, I think, that’s what this little story in Luke’s all about. It’s about a “thin place.” A place where heaven shines through, and where God comes so close you can see him (almost) and feel his touch. And it’s about

being reminded, in the most wonderful way, that we are all loved with an extraordinary love.

And it happened, says Luke, when a child came near. An infant. A newborn. A wee little baby, eight days old! You know the story... A good and godly old man, says Luke, had been waiting for the day when God would come near and touch his people with love and light. And every day he went to the temple to pray... Maybe something like this:

We wait for the Lord as we wait for the rains; and our God shall come down upon us like gentle dew... The hills and the mountains will sing for joy... and the Lord will come and reign for ever.

Every day he would go to the Temple. Can you imagine? *Every day* he would pray the same prayer, and dream the same dream, and hope against hope that the Lord would come near. And every day he would look for some sign, some signal that the Lord was ready to do what he had promised. And this went on for years, says Luke. Day after day, week after week, year after year, the old man would go to the temple and wait and watch and pray.

And one day, for some reason, this old man named Simeon went to the courtyard of the Temple. And while he was there he saw a young family -- a man and woman with a wee little baby. Couldn't have been more than a week old. And they'd come there to have the child *christened*, I suppose. Only that's not what they called it back in those days. But it was the same, in a way... being marked for God as one of his own. It was something the old man had seen a hundred times. Or more, I'm sure. But this time it was different. For the walls grew thin and heaven came near. And the old man felt as though God was so close he could touch him... And he did...

Simeon walked over and took the child in his arms. And he looked up to heaven and gave thanks to God. And he said, "God is good! God is good..." And he prayed, **"Lord, let your servant go now in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation; a light that will shine on your people. On Jew and**

gentile.” (On male and female, black and white, young and old.) For we are all loved with an extraordinary love.

We know that child, of course, by many names. *Wonderful, Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Lamb of God and Shepherd of Israel, Son of David, and Son of Man.* But we know him best as Jesus, I think -- the name at which, Paul says, **every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.** And yet, the baby that Simeon held in his arms had another name. For the prophets and the angels called him Emmanuel. And it means *God with us.* It means God *is* with us.

And it happened through a child...

Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place;

I can feel his mighty power and his grace.

I can hear the brush of angels' wings,

I see glory on each face;

surely the presence of the Lord is in this place.

Isn't it amazing? A girl in a window, a brown paper bag, a wee little baby and a gentle old man... They all seem so simple, so common, so ordinary. But they are signs and symbols and signals from heaven, all sent to remind us that we're not alone, that we are *God's* children. And that we are loved with an *extraordinary* love. For the old man was right -- God is good. And the light of his love will shine on his people. For God is near. So near, in fact, we can almost reach out and touch him.

Ah, but it isn't always easy to see that, is it? Life gets hard and the burdens pile up, and the fears and the worries start weighing you down. And it does something to you. It makes it hard to remember, that you're not alone. Because sometimes God seems so far away.

And I have a feeling, just a feeling mind you, that this might be one of those times for some people. Because the news has been so discouraging

these past few weeks. I know next to nothing about stocks and bonds and Wall Street and the like. And what all of this means for people like us. I only know that people are frightened. People are worried. We hear different things from different people -- from politicians and financial “gurus” and all of the “experts” out there. And it’s scary. People are worried about their retirement plans. *I* may have to preach till I’m ninety! Which is *really* scary... not for me so much, but for good people like you! The truth is no one seems to know for certain how long the “crisis” will last or how deep it will go.

But let me tell you what I know. Beyond all doubt, no matter what, you are not alone. God is with you. Really. And he is never against you. For God delights in his children. **Oh, see what love the Father gives us that we should be called the children of God,** said Saint John. **And that is what we are.** That’s who *you* are. God’s *beloved* one. His own dear child in whom he delights. And that means God is *for* you. And if God is for you... do you remember what it says? **If God is for us, who can be against us?**

Simeon believed that with all his heart. And every day he prayed. [**We wait for the Lord as we wait for the rains; and our God shall come down upon us like gentle dew...**] And he waited and watched. And then one day he saw a baby, a wee little baby, eight days old. And he knew in his heart that God had come near in this little child.

God still comes to us, you know. And if we wait and watch and commit ourselves to pray (every day) without ceasing, without giving up, we will discover again that this is a thin place -- that God is so near, so close that we can reach out and touch and be touched by him. For the truth is there is simply no place God would rather be than to be with you, with his beloved children. And if it becomes hard to remember that or to see that it’s true, just look at the children... and let them remind you again that God is here...

I remember a young woman named Heather who was frightened not so long ago. She had heard some disturbing news about her health. A lump was

found. And the doctor used words that she hoped never to hear... words like *tumor*, and *malignant*, and *surgery*. In fact, by the time she left the doctor's office, the surgery had been scheduled. So she was anxious and frightened. Not really certain what may lie ahead for her. And she felt alone. *Terribly* alone.

The sad thing is she couldn't bear to talk about it -- which made her feel even more alone. But that was her way. She believed, for some reason, that this was the way to be strong, this was the way to be courageous -- to go it alone. And she tried. Oh, she tried to be strong. She tried not to worry. But the harder she tried the more anxious and frightened she became.

On Sunday morning she went to church. She went a little later than usual. And she sat in the back so she could exit quickly and avoid having to talk to too many people. And somehow being there in church brought all of her emotions and all of her fears closer to the surface. And she felt more alone than ever.

And sometime during the sermon, a wee little boy, a toddler, slipped away from his mother, waddled down the aisle, looked up at Heather, and squeezed in beside her. And then the most amazing thing happened. Without saying a word the little boy crawled up on her lap and put his arms round her neck and hugged her and held her. And then he simply laid his head against her and touched her hand. And the tears rolled down her cheeks. And the "walls" grew thin. And in that child's touch she felt God's touch. And in his love and his warmth she felt the presence of God. And she felt loved and cared for. And for the first time since she received the news, she felt at peace. Because this little boy reminded her that God was there. And then he slipped away and went back to his mother.

God is here, church. God is with you. God is for you. So wait and watch. Make time to pray. If you'd like, come *here* to the church and pray in this holy place. And let God touch you and remind you are loved with an

extraordinary love. A love that is greater than all your fears and all your doubts. A Love that will never let us go.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

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BENEN, OBLSB

