

“A Christmas to Remember”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church
12-24-17 Christmas Eve

What does it mean that God came into the world to be with us in Jesus Christ? It means that we are loved. It means that we are understood. It means that we have help and hope and are not alone. As Christians we may know this in our heads, but it can still be hard to know this in our hearts. So every Christmas Eve I try to convey this good news in the form of a story that allows us to feel the good news, not just hear it. Usually I make up the stories out of whole cloth. But this year, which was such a difficult year for so many people for a wide variety of reasons, I found that I was most inspired by real stories of how God’s grace in Christ broke through the darkness with brilliant light and love. So as they say on T.V., the following bit of fiction was heavily based upon a true story, or several true stories woven together really.¹ May you hear in the experience of others, the promise and hope of Christmas for you as well.

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Some people think of time in terms of B.C., before Christ, and A.D., anno Domini. Scholars think of time in terms of B.C.E., before the Common Era, and C.E., the Common Era. But for Tammy Washington, time, the universe, and her life were all measured by B.F. and A.F., before and after the flood. Before the flood, she, her husband, John, and their five kids, ages 2 to 12, lived a pretty decent life. They were far from rich. But they had managed to get a mortgage on a small home, had a car that was half-paid off, and had great hopes for the future. Tammy’s husband worked for a petrochemical processing plant in town. It was hard work, but steady. Life was good.

Then the storm came and changed everything. “Unprecedented,” the newscasters called it. “Catastrophic!” Pummeling their state with high winds and rain the likes of which Tammy had never seen, the storm flooded the nearby bay, as well as every waterway for miles. The Washingtons had thought they could wait out the storm. By the time they realized that was a bad idea, they didn’t really have a choice. The roads were too clogged with cars to evacuate. So they waited in their home and watched as the waters flooded first their basement, and then their first floor. Hours later with the water still rising, they had to climb out a second story window to get into the boat that rescued them. Where there once had been a neighborhood and a town, suddenly all there was was water.

The Washingtons, along with all their neighbors, were taken to a shelter where they tried to get some sleep huddled on squeaky cots, surrounded by hundreds of shell-shocked strangers holding crying children. “It’s just a few days,” Tammy told her own terrified kids, who clung to her and their backpacks and stuffed animals for life. “Let’s be grateful that we are all right. We have each other, and now a warm place to stay and a roof over our heads. We just have to wait a

¹ Much of tonight’s story is a slightly fictionalized version of a true story written by Judy Ann Eichstedt of how loving strangers gave her homeless family Christmas. See Eichstedt, Judy Ann, “A Christmas I shall always remember” in PRESBYTERIANS TODAY, Nov./Dec. 2015, 54-56. I reset the story in the context of hurricane damage, drawing on reports of the numerous challenges faced by many people during the recovery from hurricane Harvey in Texas.

few days until we can go back home. Everything is going to be all right”

But a few days soon turned into a few weeks, and everything was most definitely not all right. No one could work or go to school while the streets were flooded. The mood in the shelter grew blacker and blacker each day as anxiety about the future replaced fear of death, and frustration and boredom replaced gratitude for having been rescued. When the water finally receded enough to investigate the damage, then the “I’m sorry’s” began. “I’m sorry but your house is not structurally sound and is filled with mold. You can’t stay here.” “I’m sorry but your car is totaled. Do you have insurance?” Then the worst “I’m sorry” of all for her husband: “I’m sorry but the plant is closing. The company has decided to shift its operations to one of its other plants for the foreseeable future. We’re going to have to let you go.”

Like everybody else they knew, they tried to pick themselves up by their bootstraps and begin again. They filed a claim with their homeowner’s insurance, but were told that they did not have flood damage coverage on their policy. They were also told, “I’m sorry but your neighborhood is not a priority for state buyouts.” When they filed a claim with their auto insurance company, they were told something about “force majeure and 100-year floods.” “I’m sorry but we can’t replace it.” Basically they lost everything, including their ability to cope. Without a car, John couldn’t get any work. Without work, they couldn’t get out of the shelter. “I’m sorry to have to tell you,” everyone said, as if that made everything OK because they were unhappy about it. But it wasn’t OK. It was scary, heart breaking, and infuriating. While the T.V. news moved on to other topics, Tammy and her family remained trapped in the nightmare limbo which was life AF.

She did the best she could to comfort the children. She read to them from the Bible every night and encouraged them to say their prayers. But inside, her own faith felt shaky at best; it felt like God had joined the “I’m sorry” chorus: “I’m sorry but you don’t really matter to me. I’m sorry but you’re on your own.” As the days turned to months, Tammy found herself losing hope. “No one ever mentions the shame that comes with homelessness,” she thought. “This isn’t my fault, but everyone is treating me as if it is. No one looks me in the eye anymore. No one will touch me. They just want me to go away.”

Finally, mercifully, after a couple of months their luck seemed to change. The shelter found them a small apartment a few towns over. It wasn’t much—just two bedrooms sparsely furnished with donated items for the eight of them. But it felt like a palace compared to the shelter. “We have our own bathroom!” Tammy thought. “What a luxury!” They had to use their savings and the little income that John made from doing part-time jobs in order to make the rent. But the kids could walk to the neighborhood school. So they embraced their new normal, grateful for the opportunity. They were hanging on by only a thread, but they were hanging on.

Then one day the children came home from school talking about Christmas. It was only then that it hit Tammy that they had lost that too in the flood. They had no extra money for a tree or presents, or a special meal. They were barely making rent as it was. She knew that she was going to have to tell her children that there would be no Christmas that year. Getting the apartment was their Christmas. She kept telling herself that they would understand; they had

been through so much. But the very fact that they had been through so much, meant the kids needed the trappings of Christmas more than ever, and the thought that she would now have to crush their excitement with her own “I’m sorry”-chorus made her heart sink. So she put off talking to them, even though she could see them making Christmas lists and counting down the days on the calendar until the big day.

Then one day, when Tammy walked one of her daughters to a playdate at a new friend’s house, she passed a fire station and had an idea. In their old town, the fire department once had a Toys for Tots drive at Christmastime to get gifts for children. She didn’t know if this department did, but it was worth a try. So Tammy went home and wrote a letter. She told the fire department about the house and the mold, and losing the car. She told them about her husband’s struggles finding new work. Was it possible that they could help her with something for her children? It didn’t have to be much. But they had lost so much to the flood already, lost so much to homelessness, that she couldn’t bear the thought of them losing Christmas too. She included her address, and left the note sealed in an envelope on the fire station door.

Christmas Eve morning arrived, and she still hadn’t heard a word. She couldn’t put it off any longer. She was going to have to tell her kids that Christmas was not going to arrive magically the next day. Then just as she was getting up the courage to do that, there was a knock on the door. Two women, strangers, asked if they could speak to her and her husband out in the hall for a minute. So they stepped outside, and that’s when Tammy heard the words that made her heart sink. Handing her back the letter she had left at the station, one of the women said, “I’m Edith and this is Betty. I’m sorry, but the fire station where you left your note has not been in operation for some time. They do not have a Toys for Tots drive and cannot help you.” Tammy nodded and was just about to say “thanks anyway” and go back inside when Bette started to speak. “The fire station where you left the letter is across from my house. I’m sorry, I know that it was really none of my business, but when I saw the note stuck in the door I went over to get it. I thought I would return it to whomever left it. But you didn’t leave an address on the outside so I had to open it. I know I shouldn’t have done that, but I’m glad that I did because when I read your story I knew I could help. I showed your letter to Edith here, who showed it to some other people at my church. We would like to give you Christmas this year.”

“What?” Tammy could barely believe what she was hearing. The women left the hallway and then returned a few minutes later with a small tree, some decorations, a thermos, and some Styrofoam cups. While Betty passed around hot chocolate, they decorated the tree together, singing and sharing stories. Then Edith put a present for each child under the tree, and food for Christmas dinner in the fridge. “I didn’t think we were going to have Christmas this year. Thank you for making it happen,” Tammy told the two strangers who were fast becoming friends. “Oh honey, nothing can stop Christmas from coming, not even a flood. Christmas is about God choosing to be with us, not about what we do or don’t do. As far as all these decorations and things go, getting to share them with you was a gift to us. We have wanted to help people whose lives were harmed by the storm for weeks, but we didn’t know how best to do that. Thank you for enabling us to share God’s love.”

That night the family joined Edith and Bette at worship in their church. They lit candles, sang carols, and heard the story again of how God came to earth as the child of a poor couple who had no place to stay, and lived in a time of deep darkness and fear. After worship, they shared warm hugs and traded phone numbers and best wishes. “I had forgotten,” Tammy thought, “what it felt like to be a part of a community where people actually care what happens to you. I had forgotten what a difference kindness can make.” Her children were thrilled with the gifts that had come in pretty wrapping paper. But for Tammy, the best present they received was not wrapped. It came in the form of strangers turned family, and love and understanding. God had not forgotten her. God was with her and always would be. Christmas after the flood was like Christmas before the flood in the most important way. It came with hope and love. They were going to be all right. Everything was going to be all right. “Thanks be to God!” she thought. “Thanks be to God!”