St. Aidan’s Episcopal Church

Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm 98

Hebrews 1: 1-12

Luke 2: 8-20

Jesus Gets Us

Last week, while watching football with my son, a commercial popped on about a new way to talk about Jesus to contemporary skeptics who are struggling to make sense of all that is going on in the world. Curious, and interested enough to investigate more about the commercial, I learned that a heavily invested movement has been launched offering a new form of Christian evangelism and spoke about Jesus in a way to make him more relatable to the mass who just don’t get Jesus.

In an ironic twist, the new campaign to bridge the gap between believers and skeptics, is called the “He Gets Us” campaign.[[1]](#footnote-1) “He Gets Us” began with huge donations from a faith-based non-profit organization, the Servant Foundation, which counts among its most wealthy members, a group of billionaires, who budgeted over $10 million dollars to fund the campaign in 10 test markets as a prelude to taking the “He Gets Us” campaign nationwide.

There is one singular focus to the commercials, and that is to invite the skeptics among us to recognize Jesus as an inspiring human person who can teach us a lot, regardless of what we do or don’t believe.

The campaign themes center on our anxiety and confusion about life in our times, zeroing in on our human struggles that, in many ways parallel those experienced by Jesus and the people he interacted with in Galilee.

Every commercial vignette dramatizes a human challenge and ends with the tagline, “He get us. All of us.” The word “us” is in yellow letters before the words melt into each other, spelling out the name “Jesus”, with the letters “U” and “S” still holding the color yellow: “US.”

The goal of the campaign is to establish the “He Gets Us” as a new way of presenting and talking about Jesus, and to give people a way to view Jesus as less intent on conversion, than on the opportunity to understand Jesus as a man who faced and endured the same kind of struggles as do we. The campaign quarries down into moments and stories in scripture that we don’t dwell on much when talking about Jesus’ story….how he confronted and dealt with anxiety, for instance, how he defended women’s rights and counted them equals, how he made friends with the troublemakers of his day, as well as corrupt government bureaucrats and violent nationalists, bridging the gaps between them and forming opportunities for friendship and yes, even opportunity for love.

There is much more to the story, and much more possibility for people to connect in a deeper way once they move into the concept of how Jesus “gets us.”

I was encouraged to see the commercial and to learn that there are people working to get the word out about Christianity in a way that would appeal to Jesus, who met people as they are, not as they should be. Before launching the test campaign, the highly experienced campaign team talked to people from differing faith traditions and denominations which helped them learn how to do just that.

As I delved more deeply into the how and why of the campaign, I found my own confidence in the future of Christianity and my exhilaration for my own faith journey returning and it seems fitting that on the eve of the birth of Jesus, His faithful are following his lead: listening and learning, leading lost sheep toward the safety of the fold.

Often, to believe a story, to hear it as truth, we need to hear it in a different way, a way in which we can relate and can find ourselves within: a story far more than the birth and life of a man from Nazareth, but a story that reflects a little piece of each of us.

In Luke’s story of the nativity of Jesus, we can find ourselves sharing in the fear and exuberance of the shepherds, their awed wonder at being chosen to hear the Good News of Jesus’ birth. They hurried to see the infant child and returned changed by their experience. In the same way, hearing a story in a particular way that speaks to one’s heart, can transform one from skepticism to faithful belief.

It is heartening to imagine, that some among those searching skeptics might hear anew and accept the story of Christmas Eve and find themselves transformed by it at last. It has happened before and it can happen again. It depends on time and circumstance and how we hear the story.

It is a story with depth and staying power…..a compelling story that reaches into and out of one’s senses….creating a deep and abiding call to gather with others who come to hear the story again and again…… who want to find the place in the story that has been reserved for them within a story that never grows old. The story that has filled humanity with awe and wonder from the time the shepherds shared in its reality a long time ago and continues to do so for those who wish to share in its reality today. A story that is singular and carries within it the power to change the course of life on earth…... a story that holds within its heart a reason for the Christmas tree decorating the corner of the room in many a non-believer’s home.

The famous passage from Luke, we know so well, retells the ancient story that brings this assembled congregation together this evening along with other countless similar such assemblies around this earth. It’s a story known all the world over, about Joseph and Mary, making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem where Mary bore Jesus Christ. We know the story almost by heart and, we know, too…. how it will unfold, which gives this special beginning point in the Jesus story a particular poignancy.

Mary gave birth to Jesus in a manger because there were no rooms available in Bethlehem, and she wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. When we consider the amazing proclamation made earlier to Mary by the Angel Gabriel, this she would bear the Son of God, it seems strange to people new to the story, and who do not understand his message of humility, that he would enter into his world in such humble circumstances.

And yet, many babies are being born in tents in refugee camps…..along the roadsides of escape…..deep in woods and caves……hidden from enemy sight. Babies born without the luxury of modern hospital care…..babies born into the heart of a world filled with strife and suffering…….just exactly in the same way that Jesus came into the world in a Bethlehem stable. It is one story that is our story. It is one story in which we can believe and look to as a source of hope.

We are here tonight to hear that story of hope again. We want to be reminded anew in the birth of the One who will lead us out of any chaos of our own making. And we are here because we believe something very special and unusual happened that night in the fields around the little town of Bethlehem. Shepherds experienced an extraordinary light shining around them, such as they had never seen before. The illumination was almost too brilliant to comprehend……and out of that brightness came a messenger to allay their fear of its power.

They heard for the very first time the Good News for all God’s people to hear…..that God had come to be among us….God Incarnate…. … the Giver of Life and Light. Their terror was replaced by abounding joy that was beyond their words to describe, so euphoric was their sense of renewed hope for and in the world.

It is the story of the coming of the Light that is our story….a story that those who insist Christmas is only a secular holiday cannot yet have fully heard or understood, but may yet, if only they are able hear the story in a way they, too, can understand.

There is no need for the faithful to be shy about sharing the story of Our Lord’s birth or attempt to hide it. Recognizing that while each of us has a particular way of understanding the core story of what happened that night, the way we talk about it will come with different interpretations, and through each or any of those interpretations…..each of us can find our own way, and lead others to a universal truth….that God is with us.

The truth is, the Christmas story isn’t just for Christians, and you don’t have to believe in Christ to experience it or deny it. There are no limits on it and no price of admission. The Christmas story belongs to everyone, bequeathed to all humanity by no less than God, God’s self. And that’s the critical element that just can’t be left out of Christmas. It’s God’s story. As such ,it is a universal day of celebration, a day of nostalgia, of dreaming, of giving only the best of ourselves, forgetting for a few short hours the worst of ourselves, and thanking God for the opportunity to do so.

We know there are some in the world for whom the day is meaningless, some who choose to avoid the story of God’s hope for the world on any day, even Christmas Day when they either choose the day to accentuate their inappropriateness or to conduct evil as usual.

But for most, even in the secular world, the drift of possibilities that lie within the Christmas story enters into the celebration, whether they choose to believe it or not. It is the perfect time to let them know that Jesus gets us.

If we’re paying attention, we will hear God’s call to us to remember that truth all year round, not just at Christmas. So when the time comes for us to pack away the nativity scene into its box to be stored away until next December, let us not store away our Christmas state of mind as well. As this holy night falls softly away from the calendar, let us not lose our awareness of Emmanuel, God with us.

When the Christmas season fades and worldly expectation shrugs its shoulders to return to normal living, let us not abandon the Christmas Eve story.

Because, even as we inevitably blend our Christmas state of mind into a secular mix, the story does not abandon us. Through the twelve days of Christmas, into Epiphany and beyond, God’s presence is a gift to us at any time, and on any day or night, there is never God’s absence. Each one of us, each at different places along the path of faith, might experience varying degrees of this presence. Sometimes sensing it closely, in those moments of life that are dire or euphoric, and at any of those moments we might call surreal times. Or at times when we don’t much sense the presence at all, when we’re very busy, or when we have our own point to make, or our own decision to come to, wishing no help from anyone….especially God. As Christians, our expected norm as the Christmas decorations disappear is to keep hold of the story that created the opportunity for their appearance in the first place

The light that shone round about the shepherds watching their flocks by night so long ago….. is the same light we can sense in our hearts when we awake to Christmas morning and every morning of our lives.

It is the awareness of this amazing gift of God’s presence that we are reminded to celebrate on Christmas Eve and in the days of Christmas to come, taking on the opportunities for finding joy in the delight of another, finding opportunities for offering kindness instead of indifference.

Surely, it is because, deep in the heart of humanity….. whether we proclaim ourselves to be atheists or whether we view God in a different way, surely we…. like Mary, ponder the possibilities of the kind of power that lies within a message of hope and joy and love.

It was the Light of Love that the shepherds discovered…and that informed them….. the Light of Love and mercy and grace…….that the wise men came to view for themselves, the Light of Love that began the word of mouth about God’s entrance into God’s world….that spread from a meager stable in Bethlehem….that stood the test of faith and sacrifice…..to continue to resonate in all four corners of the earth. Can any light be brighter than that?

Perhaps this is why people all over the world, no matter their politics or their personal creed, put so much effort and anticipation into Christmas the Day?

The message born into the depths of history, two thousand years ago continues to shed its Light of Love to all with eyes to see it.. It is not a message easily dismissed, no matter where one lives in the world or the circumstances occurring there. In a world that is being torn to tatters by dictators’ lust for misplaced power, by governance gone astray and by spiraling social media that brings the hard news of the world second by second, which requires us to steel ourselves to hear, and which, due to its relentless and continual bombardment, we often forget as quickly as we hear it, we can not and must not ignore a story brought into the world by God that grows bigger and brighter over time, and which continues to proclaim love to the world and moves one to never dismiss hope.

When Mary heard the shepherds telling the story of what they had heard and seen to anyone who would listen, she treasured all their words and pondered them in her heart. And we, as Christians who do understand the meaning of what the shepherds heard and saw that day, are called to do the same.

Be Mary, be Joseph, be the shepherds of your time. Tell out the story to all with ears to listen. Tell why you celebrate with lights, and gifts and offerings of food. And tell about how Jesus gets us. And how, when we get Jesus, we just can’t not love. It is the gift of love that is continuously offered to us, and we are compelled by that love to continuously offer it into an unbelieving world.

Jesus was born to deliver this truth and looks at you and says, “I get you. I know you. I understand you. Follow me. Follow me out of this silent night, out of your anxieties and your struggles and I will give you life, filled with hope, joy, love and peace.

“Then,” said Jesus, “when you do, you will get me.”

End

Written to the Glory of God

E.J. R. Culver+

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1. HeGetsUs.com [↑](#footnote-ref-1)