

Read lesson Luke 2:1-7

Let us pray: O Lord, what a glorious morning! May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, our rock and our risen redeemer. Amen.

The children in the small church Sunday School were putting on their annual Christmas pageant. Because they didn't have enough participants, one small girl was chosen to represent all of the wisemen.

The group practiced and practiced until everyone had the story ready to perform for the whole congregation. When it came time for the Magis' entrance – the little girl swept majestically up the aisle - draped in jewels from many garage sales and robes made from the bits and pieces of fine fabrics collected from the remainders box at the local discount store. Pausing and bowing before the infant's crib she announced, "Greetings, baby, Jesus! Today, I bring you gifts of Gold, Circumstance, and Mud."(1)

Now, ain't that the truth! That is exactly what life brings us. Some "gold" - not just money, but the precious moments we encounter in our lives; circumstance - lots of that, mostly unpredictable; and mud - more of that than we want, the dirty, unwieldy moments where we and our world sometimes get stuck.

"Gold, circumstance, and mud." This morning, they are all in the same place. The mud is surely all around us. We are out of Iraq, but the news from Afghanistan will be of more deaths: of citizens, of mothers, of children and of our young troops. Think any of our soldiers are humming "White Christmas" today? It is the most popular song ever written - recorded more, sung more, played more, listened to more, than any music ever. Irving Berlin wrote it in 1941 and knew immediately that he had created something special.

In fact, when he met with his colleagues the morning after he wrote "White Christmas," he reportedly said, "Fellas, I just wrote the best song in the history of the world."(2)

It was very popular during World War II when so many young Americans were separated from their families and living and fighting in difficult, dangerous circumstances far from home, and it is no doubt equally popular in Afghanistan. But being home for Christmas is simply a dream for them this year. This year they experience Mud.

On Christmas day, 2011, this globe is a dangerous place. Other parts of the world know this better than we do, of course. The news from Bethlehem today is that once again less people gathered in Manger Square listening to carols and watching the annual Christmas Eve procession into the church that holds the traditional birthplace of Jesus.

Hundreds of thousands of tourists used to throng Bethlehem in the weeks before Christmas, and the large square by the Church of the Nativity would fill with people on Christmas Eve. But during these years of violence, most potential pilgrims, like most potential tourists, have stayed away. Mud, mud, and more mud.

And we get circumstance. There is a lot to our lives that never makes the national news, but is no less real, and in many ways is incredibly more important, at least to us. For many, this is the first Christmas since Dad died, the first since the divorce, the year that the cancer came back, the year the plant closed down and everything got put on hold because, even though they say the economy is turning around, there are still no jobs out there. Circumstance.

Listen to Barbara Brown Taylor:

I know...this is a hard time of the year. There is that empty chair to deal with, that stocking that stays folded in the box. All the rituals that were designed for two or more are now up to you alone, and it is like the sound of one hand clapping. Christmas is the season you wait to see if the hurt has let up any since this time

last year -- and you want it to, so you can get on with your life -- and you don't want it to, because that might mean you have stopped caring. Meanwhile, the memories rise up to meet you swamping you with a melancholy so sweet you can almost taste it in the back of your throat.

For good or ill, every Christmas Eve functions like a kind of time machine for us, taking us back to every other Christmas Eve we have spent on this earth. For some, it is a reminder of the way life used to be, back when we were on the front row of the holiday show and not the stage managers of it...For others, this night is a reminder of the way life should have been, but never was -- those who have looked all their lives through other people's windows at such scenes of domestic bliss, but always as a peeping tom and never as an insider.(4)

Christmas day, 2011. Mud. Circumstance. But there is the GOLD too. The children that have returned home for the holiday. The Christmas card from a friend not heard from for a decade. The acceptance letter from the first-choice college that came in the midst of the cards. The new puppy out in the garage who will enchant the children tomorrow morning while making a huge mess, but so what! The Christmas Carol that triggers a memory from long, long ago. The hug you got from the one whose friendship you had feared was lost forever because of some stupid, petty words that had slipped out in a moment of frustration. Yes, along with the circumstance and mud, there is gold, all jumbled together.

In a way, we have known that for years. As we hear the Christmas story and listen to the familiar drama unfold, as we travel in our mind back to Bethlehem, we sing it over and over: "the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." On this one night, this one day, everything bad and everything good come together. Hopes and Fears. The gold, the circumstance, and the mud.

We can choose which of those will influence us most. Choose the gold. We hear the angels gathered above saying "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news..." while we bring the gold, circumstance and mud or "the hopes and fears" of this past year...really, all the hopes and fears of our lives to this day.

They are not extra baggage. They are who we are and what we are. What we do with them is up to us.

Would you like some help with them? Ultimately, that is why we are here this morning, isn't it? We remember why that baby came, and as we gather at the table, those fears we carry are suddenly wrapped in the swaddling clothes of hope.

Gold, circumstance, and mud. We bring them all the Jesus, and remember the words, "Do not be afraid... for unto you this day is born the Messiah"! Amen!