

When Having a Holly Jolly Christmas is Tough

Habakkuk 3:17 & 18

December 21, 2008

Travis Collins

Throughout the movie, *Christmas Vacation*, Clark Griswold is expecting a big Christmas bonus. He shares with his co-worker that he is going to put in a swimming pool with that bonus. He even shows his co-worker a picture of the kind of pool he's going to put in.

He gets nervous when the bonus doesn't come but is relieved when a courier shows up with an envelope from his company on Christmas Eve! This is the long-awaited bonus! There are cheers all around from his family.

Then he opens the envelope. There is no cash bonus. Instead, he has a letter informing him that the company has purchased a membership for him in a club—the “jelly of the month” club.

How do you celebrate Christmas when you get jelly instead of a swimming pool? When the bonuses don't come and the finances are tight? How do you celebrate Christmas when you're unemployed or in danger of losing a job or in debt? How do you celebrate Christmas in a recession?

Today's Christmas message is different from most Christmas messages. It doesn't come from Luke's or Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus. I was drawn, instead, to the words of Habakkuk inspired by God and which seem so appropriate for Christmas, 2008. These words of Habakkuk speak of celebrating—of taking heart and gaining strength—even when the crops and the livestock aren't anything to brag about. Of course he wrote in an agrarian economy and if he had written that today he might have said, “Even though my job is in jeopardy my portfolio is pitiful, and my financial future is frightening. I still will rejoice.”

And we can rejoice in a difficult economic time. Of course your anxiety might not be about the economy at all. It might be about a relationship that is crumbling or it might be a loss that you experienced this year. Whatever threatens your celebration this Christmas, I have some encouraging truths for you.

First, there is a divine plan and you can trust it. (“I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord. Plans to prosper you and not to harm you. Plans to give you a future and a hope,” Jeremiah 29:11.)

I love the story of Naomi, for it is the story of the long and painful journey toward the fulfillment of God's plan. A famine in Bethlehem forced Naomi, her husband, and her two sons to flee their beloved homeland to the land of Moab across the Jordan in search of food. There, as the family was settling in their new home, tragedy struck. Naomi's husband, her companion of many years, died.

Naomi's two sons found wives of their own among the local young ladies. Then, a few years later, one of her sons died. At least, Naomi had the comforting presence of the remaining son ... but, after not so long a time he died, too. Naomi was left to grieve alone in a foreign land.

Naomi became so bitter that, upon her return to Bethlehem, she instructed her friends, “Don't call me ‘Naomi’” (Naomi means “pleasant”). “Call me ‘Mara,’” (the word for “bitter”) she said, “for God has dealt bitterly with me.”

But time healed Naomi's pain. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth (who had accompanied Naomi to Bethlehem), married Boaz and they had a son. The young couple presented the baby to Naomi so that Naomi could be the child's nursemaid.

In the closing scene of the book of Ruth Naomi's friends are standing around as she rocks the baby. They are saying, “Oh, Naomi, God has been so good to you. He has given you the blessing of this little boy. This grandson will bring you so much happiness in your old age. And you have a wonderful daughter-in-law who loves you more and is better to you than seven sons.”

But that's not the end of the story. Naomi would not live to see the best part. The name of the baby in Naomi's arms was Obed. When Obed grew up, he had a son of his own and named him Jesse. Jesse then grew up and had a son named David. We know him as King David, the most loved king of Israel. And maybe you know who was a descendent of King David ... that child whose birth we will celebrate on Thursday...the Lord Jesus.

God's ways are unfathomable. But His designs, His plans, are as wonderful as they are incomprehensible. “I know the plans I have for you,” says the Lord. “Plans to prosper you, and not harm you. Plans to give you hope and a future.” I believe that. But I know that sometimes the fulfillment of His plans sometimes leads us down rather difficult paths.

Our hope is based on a willingness to trust that God does have a plan even when we, for the life of us, can't see it. So, in the words of a song that has meant a great deal to Keri and me, “When you don't understand, when you can't see His plan, when you can't trace His hand, trust His heart.”

Second, there is a silver lining and you can expect it. (“In all things God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose,” Romans 8:28.)

There was a recent article in *The Times On Line* titled, “*Why the recession is a blessing in disguise.*” Here are a few lines from that article.

Recessions...might actually be a blessing...When times are good, research by Stanford University and the University of North Carolina shows that people of all classes tend not to take care of themselves and their families. The better off may have gym membership but all classes drink too much (especially before driving), they eat more fat-laden food - either pre-packaged from supermarkets or in restaurants - and are more likely to neglect their families. In downturns, people have more time to visit their elderly relatives and are more likely to look after their children themselves.

...Ralph Catalano, professor of public health at the University of California, Berkeley, believes that it is an oversimplification to say that recessions are good for people, but he thinks that they do encourage healthier lifestyles. “People who are worried about losing their jobs do things that keep them from getting laid off - they drink less and take fewer risks.”

The article concludes...*So while there is no such thing as a good recession, it doesn't have to cause unmitigated gloom and despondency.*

I don't mean to minimize the seriousness of this recession. I don't pretend to know the pain that some of you are feeling regarding layoffs and the sort. However, this economic downturn could turn out to have some positive impact on us in the long run.

It might just help solve our problem of living above our means. If credit gets a little tighter then maybe it will be harder for us to borrow so much that the struggle to pay it back gives us ulcers and keeps us up at night and causes stress on families.

It might just force some of us into better jobs—work that is more meaningful. I know folks who have lost their jobs and ended up with work and lives that are far more enjoyable than before. Job cutbacks might force us out beyond our “comfort zones”—taking a risk to embrace a new experience. It might require going back to school and gaining new skills but it could be the best thing that's happened to us.

It could turn out to have a silver lining, this recession.

Romans 8:28 says, “In all things God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.” That's not a promise that things will turn out as you'd hope they will. *It is* a promise that God will work in your crisis to bring about some good.

I'm not saying “Everything happens for a reason.” That's rather clichéd and trite and shallow. I *am* saying that God will take those inexplicable tragedies and turn them into something wonderful if we'll give Him time.

Third, there is a real Christmas and you can experience it.

How do you celebrate when having a holly, jolly Christmas is not easy. For that answer I turn first to one of America's great philosophers. Perhaps you will recognize these lines from one of his famous short stories...

*The Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice-cold in the snow,
Stood puzzling and puzzling: “How could it be so?”
“It came without ribbons! It came without tags!
“It came without packages, boxes or bags!”
And he puzzled three hours, till his puzzler was sore.
Then the Grinch thought of something he hadn't before!
“Maybe Christmas,” he thought,, “doesn't come from a store.
Maybe Christmas...perhaps...means a little bit more!”*

Christmas doesn't come from a store...or from the Treasury Department...or from Wall Street or the Federal Reserve. It doesn't come from Ebay or Macy's. Christmas means a whole lot more.

Lee Strobel is a well-known author and minister. A graduate of Yale Law School, he wrote *The Case for Christ*, *The Case for Faith*, and *The Case For a Creator*. Strobel had a dramatic conversion in 1981. At the time of his conversion, he was a writer for the Chicago Tribune. And he was an agnostic—a person who has decided that the evidence for God just is insufficient for him or her to make the leap of faith to believe. His journey to faith in Jesus is a remarkable one, and it all began with the Delgados.

It was a Christmas Eve afternoon back in the 1970's and the newspaper's office was rather quiet. Strobel's mind wandered backward to a family he'd met a month earlier when doing an article on needy families in Chicago. He was thinking of the Delgados—sixty-year-old Perfecta and her two granddaughters, Lydia and Jenny.

This small family had been burned out of one roach-infested place and now were in another tiny apartment. Strobel had visited that little apartment in his work on the story for the newspaper. He couldn't believe how empty it was. No furniture. No rugs. Bare walls.

Eleven-year-old Lydia and thirteen-year-old Jenny owned one dress each and those dresses were both short-sleeved. They owned one thin sweater between them. When they walked to school in the cold one would wear the sweater half the distance and then give it to her sister who would wear it the rest of the way to the school.

Strobel said he never did get the feeling of despair or self-pity in the Delgado home. Instead, he wrote, there was a gentle feeling of hope and peace. Perfecta Delgado spoke attributed that to their faith in Jesus.

So, sitting there in his office on Christmas Eve, he reflected on the difference between the Delgado's Christmas and his own. The Delgados had almost nothing, but they seemed happy. He, on the other hand, had everything, and inside felt as empty as their apartment.

Strobel decided to pay the Delgados a follow-up visit. He drove over to their little place on the West Side and couldn't believe his eyes when he walked in. Readers of the article he'd done about them in the Chicago Tribune had showered the Delgados with furniture and food and clothes (including coats and gloves) and even money.

But that wasn't what surprised him most. What surprised him most was that Perfecta and her two granddaughters were preparing their gifts...to give most of them away. Perfecta explained, in broken English, "Our neighbors are still in need. We cannot have plenty while they have nothing."

When the conversation turned to the overwhelming generosity of those who had donated all the gifts, Perfecta was deeply grateful. "This is a gift from God," she declared. But she added this: "It is not his greatest gift. No, we celebrate that tomorrow. That is Jesus."

Strobel wrote, "At that moment something inside of me wanted desperately to know this Jesus...Something made me long for what they had. Or, more accurately," he wrote, "for the One they knew."

His investigation into the person of Jesus, and his subsequent conversion and marvelous ministry, began with a grandmother and two granddaughters who had joy at Christmas despite their difficult situations.

But there's one more thing from that story of Lee Strobel. He was thinking about the Delgados and the difference their faith made in their lives as he was driving back to his office at the Chicago Tribute. Suddenly his thoughts were interrupted by his boss's voice on his car's two-way radio (back before cell phones), sending him on another assignment. Jarred back to reality by the new assignment, for a long time he forgot the Delgados and that moment when he'd so desperately wanted, in his words, "the One they knew."

I fear that will happen with some of us. So let's not wait until you get out the door. Would you pause right now to consider your relationship with Jesus? I invite you to these three things:

1) Turn. Turn from what you know to be wrong in your life—those things that are harmful to you and displeasing to God—what the Bible calls “sin.” Say, “God, with your help, I’m doing a U-turn with my life” and reorienting my life toward Jesus.

2) Believe. That’s Macy’s Department Store’s big theme for the year, but I’m not talking about some fairy-tale, feel-good slogan. I’m talking about trusting your life, for this world and the next, in Jesus. Believing that he is God the Son made flesh, that his death makes the forgiveness of your sin possible, and that his resurrection makes life at its best and life that never ends possible.

3) Surrender. Surrender your will, that part of you where you make decisions, to God. Admit that you’ve been in the driver’s seat and that you’ve made some wrong turns. And allow the Creator of the universe to be your Master, to weave His beautiful creative power into your life.

The Grinch was right. Christmas doesn’t come in a store. And you can experience the Jesus of Christmas.