



Sermon: Christmas Eve 2011 Hold On Rev. Steve Clifton

A friend of mine posted a photo on her Facebook page. It was a picture from a traffic accident somewhere in the United States. A very large vehicle had struck a pedestrian and the woman was now pinned under this big machine. Next to her there was a police officer. He had crawled under the vehicle and was lying next to the woman on the ground. He took her hand and said to her: "I am staying with you. As long as you're here, I will be here too."

This picture and its story reminded me of another story I heard some time ago. Henry Carter, a pastor and an administrator of a home for Children in Need, tells the story of an encounter he had one Christmas Eve.

He was busy with last minute preparations for the home's Christmas Eve service, when one of the floor mothers came to say that a young boy named Tommy had crawled under his bed. And now Tommy refused to come out.

Henry followed the housemother up the stairs and looked at the bed she pointed to; not a hair or foot or elbow showed from beneath it.

So Henry talked to Tommy as if he were addressing the bucking broncos on the boys bedspread. He stood above the boy and his bed and he talked about the brightly-lit tree, the packages underneath it and the other good things that were waiting for Tommy out beyond that bed.

No answer.

Still fretting about the time this was costing and thinking about his unfinished sermon; Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the bed cover. Two enormous blue eyes looked out at him. Tommy was 8, but looked like a 5 year-old. He could easily have just pulled the boy out. But it wasn't pulling that Tommy needed.

So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper that was happening after the service. He spoke of turkey and stuffing, of pie and ice cream. He told of the stocking with Tommy's name on it, provided by the Women's Society. And told him about the kind of things Tommy might discover inside it, if only he would come out and see.

Silence. There was no indication Tommy heard or that he even cared about Christmas.

At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in beside Tommy, snagging his sport coat on the bedsprings on the way. He lay there with his cheek pressed against the floor for a long time. He talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally running out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Tommy.

After a bit, a small child's chilled hand slipped into Henry's hand.

Henry said, "You know, Tommy, it is kind of close quarters under here. Let's you and me go out where we can stand up." As they slid out from under the bed, Henry realized he had been given a glimpse of the mystery of Christmas.

After all doesn't God call to us, as Henry had called Tommy, from far above us? With God's stars and mountains and God's whole majestic Creation, doesn't God invite us to love God and to enjoy the universe God gives us as a gift?

And when we don't listen, God gets closer.

Through the prophets and scriptures, through the people we encounter and the events of everyday, God speaks to us. God draws near to tell us about this love and the wonderful gifts (peace, hope love, community, joy ...), the gifts that are ours if only we would come to God to receive them.

Still we don't listen.

And so on that first Christmas, God finally comes down, gets next to us to tell us of his wondrous love and of the life God would give to us. Just as Henry Carter crawled under the bed to invite the child out to share in the wonders of Christmas Eve, ( just as the policeman crawled in next to the injured woman), so on the first Christmas Eve God came to be with us right where we are.

In the baby Jesus, born in a cold stable on a dark night God wriggles up close. In the baby Jesus who grows to become the man Jesus, God wriggles up beside us, to speak to us of love, to share healing, to offer life. And God does that so that we, like Tommy, might dare to stretch out our hands to take hold of God's love.

Tonight, God comes close. In the birth of Jesus, God comes close to you in love. In Jesus, God wriggles right up next to you right where you are. God's hand is open to you. Take hold. Merry Christmas.