

WITHOUT A RIPPLE

I have a CONFESSION to make to you tonight: I am a GRAFFITI-READER! That's right! I read graffiti WHEREVER and WHENEVER I see it, which is usually on men's room walls. And USUALLY, I get totally DISGUSTED by what I read there. USUALLY, it's pretty GROSS stuff. But IT'S there and I'M there, and it's something to DO. So, I READ it.

And I think I READ it because, every once-in-a-while, AMIDST all that gross stuff, **IF** you look VERY hard, you can SOMETIMES find a real GEM. Maybe it's a good JOKE, or a little TIDBIT of earthy WISDOM, but EVERY once-in-a-while, you FIND something that's WORTH jotting down on whatever's HANDY, which is usually a dollar bill or a TAD of toilet paper. It's something to SHARE with friends or SAVE for some special occasion, IF I don't FORGET about it and SPEND the dollar bill by mistake. But, it's these little GEMS that make reading ALL that GROSS stuff worthwhile.

Well, it was in JUST such a place – it was on the wall of the MEN'S Room in a CHINESE Restaurant in Boston, the *Imperial Teahouse*, where I found my 2007 Christmas Message. Now, I have no idea WHY he WROTE it, OR, WHY he chose to write it THERE, but the MOMENT I laid EYES upon it, it STRUCK me! THIS was a CHRISTMAS message if EVER I saw one! And it was a CHRISTMAS message because it answered the question of **WHY** those WISE men were so OVERJOYED when they saw that star come to REST over a lowly STABLE in the tiny village of BETHLEHEM. AND, it was a CHRISTMAS message because it's the same **GOOD NEWS** that brought those SHEPHERDS to their KNEES in that stable in front of a little BABY, wrapped in RAGS and lying in a FEEDING trough for the animals. Yes, THIS was the GEM of GEMS for a preacher! It was PERFECT! And it was WORTH almost 50 YEARS of reading GROSS graffiti.

SO, I QUICKLY scribbled it down on a piece of TOILET paper, and carefully HID it in a little, secret pocket in the far reaches of my TRI-FOLD wallet. And then I FORGOT about it for months and months, until ONE day, when I was transferring my "LIFE" into a NEW tri-fold wallet, THERE it was: my men's room WISDOM from the *Imperial Teahouse* in Boston's CHINATOWN. And AS I carefully unfolded the AGING toilet paper and RE-READ it, I liked it even MORE than I did before.

And SO, I share it with you tonight as my 2007 Christmas Message. And REMEMBER as you listen to it that THIS, in a NUTSHELL, is the "Good News" that OVERJOYED those Wise Men 2000 years ago. THIS, in a NUTSHELL, is the heavenly MESSAGE of the ANGELS to those FEARFUL shepherds on that Bethlehem hillside so VERY long ago. SO, here it IS, a piece of eternal WISDOM from an anonymous GRAFFITTI-writer in Boston. He writes: ***Entering the forest, GOD moves NOT the GRASS! And entering the WATER, GOD makes NOT a RIPPLE!*** Hear it AGAIN: ***Entering the forest, GOD moves NOT the grass! And entering the WATER, GOD makes NOT a RIPPLE!***

Now, that may not SOUND like much at FIRST, but BELIEVE me, it is GREAT news! In fact, it's absolutely SUPER news, especially for NEWSPAPER readers and TV NEWS-WATCHERS! And THAT'S because it doesn't take very LONG of watching the TV NEWS for us to get DOWN and DEPRESSED! It's almost always BAD news, and it's very HARD to find ANY trace of GOD in it. And SO, it's HARD for us to be HOPEFUL, even on Christmas. It makes us feel like those WISE men must have felt, as they LEFT the palace of King HEROD, that bloodthirsty, jealous MANIAC of a king, who even murdered his OWN wife and 3 of his OWN sons. The wise men had GONE there, of COURSE, just naturally ASSUMING that a new KING would be BORN amidst all that royal WEALTH, FAME and POWER. But QUICKLY, it became CLEAR to them that this PALACE was NOT the place.

You know: it's DEFLATING for us to get ourselves ALL psyched up for Christmas -- and all the FUN and family time; all the religious POMP and ceremony; all the LIGHTS, TINSEL and festivities; all the EXCITEMENT of the children; and all the JOY of carol-singing – it's DEFLATING to get ALL psyched UP for it, when we KNOW, deep in our hearts, that on December 26th -- when ALL the festivities are DONE; when the TURKEY is picked over; when the GUESTS have all gone home; and

when the GIFTS have been put away – that nothing, but NOTHING, will have CHANGED! It will BE just another flat, grey, down day, with just more “BAD news from Katie Chouric.” Isn’t it DEFLATING to think about that? And whether I TALK about it or NOT, the SADNESS of that realization FLOWS, even NOW, BENEATH our festive and very BEAUTIFUL candlelight COMMUNION service. And THAT’S the VERY same SADNESS that those WISE MEN felt as they LEFT Herod’s palace. AND, it’s the VERY same SADNESS that those lowly SHEPHERDS felt as they HOPED, and PRAYED, generation after generation, that God’s MESSIAH would SOON come and SAVE them, as promised. AND, it’s the VERY same SADNESS that Mary and Joseph felt, and every OTHER parent in Israel, EVEN as they feebly HOPED that THEIR child just MIGHT be the PROMISED one of God.

Well, THINK about that, my friends, because EVERY single ONE of those people ended UP on their KNEES in that FILTHY, smelly, little STABLE; in that JERKWATER, little VILLAGE; KNEELING in ADORATION at the sight of that WEAK, helpless, innocent, little BABY; and PRAISING God with a JOY in their hearts that just OVERWHELMED and cast OUT all their SADNESS! WHY? Did you EVER stop and ask yourself WHY? WHY, for example, would those WISE men, a bunch of rational, reserved, scientific, scholarly types, completely LOSE their composure, and give way to an ecstasy of NAKED adoration, POURING out the most PRECIOUS of gifts in their dumbfounded WORSHIP of a newborn INFANT? WHY?

Well, it’s because they REALIZED this great TRUTH, this eternal good NEWS, that *entering the forest, God moves not the grass, and entering the water, God makes not a RIPPLE*. OR, in the words of Mark Twain: *the GREATEST miracles happen JUST where people say, ‘I don’t see anything MIRACULOUS about THAT!’* My friends, the REAL miracle and mystery of Christmas is a very HUMAN one! It’s a BABY, whose name is EMMANUEL. THAT’S the HEBREW word for Jesus’ name, *Emmanuel*. And very simply, it means, *GOD-is-with-us*. And THAT’S the miracle and mystery of Christmas, isn’t it? We call it *the INCARNATION*. And it’s GOD entering human LIFE, and entering it SO humbly, and SO unobtrusively, that MOST people MISSED it, just as I suppose MOST people have missed it ever since – AND just as I suppose that most of US will probably MISS it as well. Yes, it’s GOD, entering human life SO quietly, that there are NO ripples, at least, no OBVIOUS ripples.

However, Christmas celebrates even MORE than that! It does NOT just celebrate God entering human life back THEN, or up THERE. No, it celebrates the fact that God STILL enters human life HERE and NOW, even in the MIDST of Katie Chouric’s, *BAD NEWS TONIGHT!* God STILL enters human life, even in the MIDST of our Christmas DEFLATEDNESS! God STILL enters human life, even in the MIDST of our FEAR because we live DAILY with WAR and TERRORISM and international CRISES of every kind! Yes, Christmas celebrates that God is STILL present with us; STILL loving us; STILL working for our REDEMPTION; STILL nudging and nuzzling people; and STILL scattering HINTS and POSSIBILITIES in and among us in very MYSTERIOUS and MIRACULOUS ways. And God DOES it all SO humbly and SO unobtrusively that we DON’T even see a RIPPLE!

Yes, THAT’S the POINT of Christmas, isn’t it? It’s NOT about ANGELS and royal visitors! NO! It’s about a BABY and a POOR family and an “OUT-BACK” BIRTH. It’s about the fact that something SO little can TILT a SEE-SAW from ONE side to the OTHER – OR, how a small, mid-course CORRECTION can completely CHANGE the destination of an airplane. Yes, it’s about GOD entering human life, WITHOUT even a RIPPLE, in order to HELP our “HELL-BENT” humanity to make a mid-course CORRECTION. AND, it’s about GOD entering MY “hell-bent” life and YOURS, with hardly a RIPPLE, in order to scatter HINTS and possibilities that will GUIDE us from DEATH into LIFE, from DESPAIR into HOPE, and from SADNESS into JOY!

Yes, friends, THAT is what Christmas is all ABOUT! And so: *BEHOLD, this night I bring you GOOD tidings of GREAT joy: Entering the forest, God moves NOT the grass! Entering the water, God makes NOT a ripple! And entering our HEARTS, God makes NOT a SOUND!* SO, let’s HURRY now to Bethlehem, the BETHLEHEM that lies deep WITHIN each ONE of us, and let us SEE this thing that has happened, which God has made KNOWN to us. Yes, let us GO to BETHLEHEM, the Bethlehem in each of our HEARTS and find our OWN kneeling place in that filthy, little stable WITHIN, where we TOO can worship and adore the INCARNATION, for God IS with us and always WILL be. Amen.