

December 24, 2006      **Christmas Eve Meditation – A Fire Truck for Christmas**

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Luke 2:15-20, “And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, “Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.” And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.”

I want to tell you a story about a little boy at Christmas. The story begins more than 50 years ago when a couple named Tom and Doris Nelson lived in a section of greater Boston known as Jamaica Plain. Tom was a graduate of MIT, a smart, successful businessman and Doris was his loving and devoted wife. They were members of The Baptist Church in Brookline. They had two sons. Tom Jr. and then another boy Richard was born. Richard was the joy of his parent’s lives. In the early 1950’s, Richard became ill and his parents took him to a hospital in Boston. Tragically, Richard was misdiagnosed and died when he three years old, three days before Christmas.

A number of years passed and in 1960 the Baptist Church called a young pastor named Vic Scalise and his wife, Mary to begin their first ministry with them in Brookline. At the welcoming dinner, my mother was seated next to Tom Nelson and they hit it off. Because the Nelson’s were older than my parents, they looked on my mom and dad as parents look on their grown children. Doris had a serene, saintly looking face, Tom had a hardened face.

As the Nelson’s got to know my parents better they shared about the painful death of their young son almost a decade before. Mr. Nelson said to my dad, “*A businessman makes a mistake and it costs \$25,000, when a doctor makes a mistake it changes your life.*”

When I was born, my dad says, I was like the apple of Tom Nelson’s eye. He took a great interest in me. He read to me, loved being with me, in a sense, I was like Richard re-born, the boy that he lost. He was like another grandfather for my sisters and

me. He enjoyed coming to the house and playing with us – especially building with blocks and Legos. On Christmas morning 1968 my sisters and I had looked through our stockings, woken up our parents, and come down stairs where we gathered in the living room. We read the Christmas story from Luke 2, sang a song, and then began to open presents while dad used his movie camera to film the proceedings. While we were doing this, the doorbell rang. I can remember going to look through the windows next to our front door and seeing the Nelson's on our stairs, with several wrapped presents in their arms. Mr. Nelson was carrying a particular long, rather large present.

We said, "*Merry Christmas!*" and welcomed them into our home and they joined us in the living room. As my father started filming again Mr. Nelson placed the large present on the floor and looked at me with moist eyes and said, "*This is for you.*" I tore the wrapping off and saw the biggest, heaviest, and most amazing fire truck I had ever seen.

What I did not know at the time was that I was not the intended recipient of the fire truck. Mr. Nelson had bought the fire truck and Mrs. Nelson had wrapped it many years before for their son Richard. When Richard died, they had kept this prize Christmas present in the attic still wrapped for 17 years.

I had no way of knowing as a 4 year old all that was taking place. I just knew I had a wonderful fire truck which I would play with for many years. But for my parents and the Nelson's it was a very significant event and as I got older my appreciation for the significance of the gift and what it represented grew.

The Nelsons stayed very close to my parents for the rest of their lives. They were always great to my family. Mr. Nelson was instrumental in encouraging the church to help my parents buy their first house. They rented the cottage just down from ours in Maine for 7 years when we were growing up. The Nelson's died in the 1990's but every time I see the fire truck, I think of them and remember the loss of their child at Christmas, the gift they gave me, and what it represents. The love of parents for a child, the healing that can come from letting go of our hurt and giving to someone else out of our pain. It represents the possibility of new life that come in the midst of darkness.

The image of a fire truck is a very appropriate one for Christmas and not just because it is red. A fire truck is used to rescue, to provide deliverance, for salvation from danger. Firefighters risk their lives going into places when others are trying to escape.

At Christmas we remember Jesus came to earth to rescue us from our sins and mistakes, he came to deliver us from the power of death, and he is our hope and salvation. He left his heavenly home to come to earth to face trials, tests, and temptations, even to risk and give his life that we might be saved.

Every year the Christmas Story reminds us that God has drawn close to us through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Throughout the course of Jesus' ministry, he broke down barriers which separated people from God and each other. As the Apostle Paul wrote, "... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself...and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Cor. 5:19).

I want to tell you one more story about another little boy at Christmas.

"In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics based on biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments and a large orphanage. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. They related the following story in their own words.

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly I called for the translator to ask the boy why there were two babies in the manger.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, "And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then, Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him...for always."

As Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who never abandon or abuse him, someone who would stay with him – FOR ALWAYS. It's not *what* you have in your life, but *who* you have in your life that counts.

This Christmas Eve let us be thankful for who we have in our life, let us keep Jesus warm in our hearts and lives, and let us remember:

**"Our contentment lies not in God's presents but in God's presence."**

**Prayer:**

Most Gracious God:

We give thanks that you have heard the cries of us, your children, lost in darkness. We joyously celebrate the birth of your Son whom you sent to us to be our light and show us your way to life. Remember your people this night and always. Let the brilliance of your loving grace dispel the gloom and bleakness of our lives. And let the glow of your gospel glisten strongly in us so that we may be your light to the world. In the name of your Son, our Savior and Light, Jesus Christ, we pray.

**Blessing:**

May the light of this child Jesus illuminate your way forever.

May the blessings which broke through the darkness on this night be yours.

May you always have cause to sing praises, give thanks, and celebrate the true light of the world, our Savior, Jesus Christ.