

Christmas Eve 2019 “The Day After”

Christmas gifts don't always arrive under the tree *on* Christmas morning. Some gifts turn up in the days that follow — like, say, when folks show up later to keep the celebration going (our family happens to be gathering on Boxing Day). Or when the package that someone mailed late finally arrives, a little post-Christmas treat. And some gifts, *some* gifts arrive *long* after.

Six years ago, late on a summer Sunday afternoon, I walked over here to the church from the Parsonage and found a gift. There was something hanging from the door handle of the church, something bright and colorful that definitely hadn't been there that morning. It was this — this bell, dangling on this string with this little handmade clay heart.

And I thought — how sweet, how whimsical — someone has decided to decorate the church door! — And then I noticed this tag on the bell ... it says “You have a Ben's Bell. Take it home, hang it, and remember to spread kindness throughout our world.”

I did take it home — hung it on a door. And every time the bell rings, we remember the power that kindness has to change our world.

Maybe you've found one of Ben's bells yourself — there are thousands of them out there.

There's a story behind them, a poignant story.

Many years ago, a mom and dad out in Tucson lost their little boy — he was 3.

That was Ben.

And in their grieving,

Ben's mom and dad discovered that what made it possible to live through their sadness

was the extraordinary kindness they received,

the powerful, loving, compassionate kindness from the people around them.

It was that kindness, they said, that helped them begin to heal.

So they decided that they wanted to *share* the kindness and the love that they'd received, in Ben's name.

And they had an idea.

Ben's parents — and their friends — began making bells,

and hanging them randomly in trees, and on bike paths, and in parks.

And those bells - well, they rang out a powerful message.

Those bells told people to offer the same kindness to one another that Ben's parents had received.

That was many years ago, and many thousands of bells ago.

And the number of lives now touched, and the kindness spread, is beyond measure.

Here's just one of the letters Ben's parents have received:

I had been stressed out, worried, and angry at the world.

Then I came across this bell hanging on a branch on a small tree.

I read the card attached and knew that things are going to be OK.

I hung the bell next to my front door so that each time I leave or come home it is there to greet me and remind me what is important:

Love, Kindness and Joy. Pass it on.

What Ben's parents had received from others, they knew to be a gift.
And what they did with that gift was to make sure that others received it,
too.

They had been offered kindness. They had been shown love.
They were determined to share that with the world.

On a dark night on the hills outside Bethlehem,
there were shepherds who received a gift.

They certainly weren't expecting it.

They were out there shivering in the cold on another long night of watching
and waiting.

Shepherding was a *miserable* job, actually,
low pay, long hours --

and so it was a job that tended to go to people on the margins of society.

But it was to shepherds, those shepherds —
that God sent the first word of great good news.

There is **hope**, the angels said to them,

A child is born — a Messiah, a Savior —
there is hope and healing on the way.

And the shepherds ran, it says, the shepherds ran to Bethlehem,
where they saw that it was true — Love had born,
God could be trusted, hope was alive.

And then the story says this — Luke, chapter 2, verse 16:

*The shepherds returned — the day after -- glorifying and praising God for
all that they had heard and seen.*

Glorifying and praising God.

Which is to say: all that Love that they had received,
they were ready to share it.

All the hope they now felt, they wanted others to feel.
That good news the angels had told them,
they wanted the world to hear it.
Those shepherds were the Ben's Bells of Bethlehem, two thousand years ago.
Passing on the Love that they had been given.

There was a little story in the back pages of the New York Times a few weeks back.

It was part of the Times' 'Neediest Cases' series,
highlighting the people whom your holiday giving helps.
And this one told the story of Gloria Espada,
who each day, when she rides the subway,
makes sure she has a pocket full of dollar bills in case any one asks for money.

Gloria does that because just a year ago,
she was the person asking for money.

Homeless, alcoholic, she was that person that other riders on the subway moved away from.

And then, one day this happened:
during a three-day bender, drunk and wandering the streets,
Gloria mistook a church for a bar.

Truth.

On Atlantic Avenue, Gloria walked through the door of a storefront church thinking she'd found a place to get a drink.

Instead, a church usher greeted her with a hug,
and down front the pastor was making his altar call,
and Gloria heard God telling her, heard God saying,
"You're finally home where you belong."

That was it. She stayed. And she let God turn her life around.

Now Gloria shares her testimony to any who will listen;

she goes into the parks where she used to hang out and shares the story of God's love,
and she rides the subway with those pockets full of dollar bills for anyone who asks.

Glorifying and praising God.

Like the shepherds.

Glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen.

The Shepherds, Ben's bells, and Gloria Espada.

And now it's our turn.

Like the shepherds, dazzled by the vision of love they had seen.

Like Gloria, overwhelmed by the love that was waiting for her in a storefront church.

Like little Ben's parents, healed and held by kindness.

Here we are — receivers of miracle, recipients of grace, gifted by love.

Now it's our turn to find the way to share that.

Now it's our turn to ring the bells, to spread the word.

Now it's our turn to glorify and praise God for all that we have heard and seen.

There's a poem I've always loved,
written many years ago by Howard Thurman,
the legendary chaplain at Boston University,
about the day after Christmas — our theme tonight.

His poem is about what it means to one day
receive a powerful, wonderful gift of love —
and the next day take it out into the world.

The poem goes like this:

*When the song of the angels is stilled, when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,*

*the work of Christmas begins: to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.*

To make music in the heart. **That's** what we're called to —
on the day after Christmas, 2019. Amen.