

Do you ever feel lost or out of place?

My children laugh at me for how easily I can get lost. I even have a mug that says, "Every great journey begins with a dad saying, "I know a shortcut." Do you ever feel lost? Do you ever feel like you just don't get it?

Once a man was driving a truck and he stopped for a red light. A blonde woman pulls up behind him. She jumps out of her car and runs up to his truck, knocks on the door. The trucker lowers the window and she says, "Hi, my name is Heather and you are losing some of your load." The trucker looks at her in disbelief and proceeds down the street.

When the truck stops for another red light, the girl catches up again. She jumps out of her car, runs up and knocks on the door. Again, the trucker lowers the window. As if they have never spoken before the blonde says brightly, "Hi, my name is Heather, and you are losing some of your load."

Shaking his head, the trucker ignores her again and continues down the street. At the third red light, the same thing happens again. All out of breath, the blonde gets out of her car, runs up, and knocks on the truck door. The trucker lowers the window. Again she says, "Hi, my name is Heather, and you are losing some of your load!"

When the light turns green, the trucker revs up and races to the next light. When he stops this time, he hurriedly gets out of the truck, and runs back to the blonde. He knocks on her window and as she lowers it, he says, "Hi, my name is Kevin. It's winter in Wisconsin, and I'm driving the salt truck."

The poor woman, she just didn't get it. I am not sure she was lost. But she just didn't get it.

Do you ever feel lost? Do you ever feel like you just don't get it? Do you ever feel like you just don't get what is going on around you?

If you are like me, when we look out at our world, and see the turmoil that is happening right now to our economy, you might be feeling like you just don't get it either. The turmoil that is taking place around us is a good reminder that this world is not perfect. We are a long ways from perfect.

Most of us in this room tonight, are longing for something better. We see the brokenness of what is, and we are longing for something better. We see the people who losing their jobs and we are longing for a more stable economy. We see the people who are at risk of losing their homes and we are longing for more stability. We see people who are fearful and we long for a time of evenness. We see people who are worried over health issues for themselves or loved ones and we long for health and healing. We know what it is like to long for something better.

In our scripture for tonight, Jesus is born into a world where people are longing for something better, too. There are very few people who are succeeding. Most feel as if they are on the outside looking in.

Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem to take part in census for a foreign government that they don't want to really take part in. They are pregnant. They can't find a place to stay that is befitting of a woman ready to give birth. They are longing for a better world.

To Mary and Joseph's world and to our world, where people are longing for something better, this Christmas story is the story of our God who comes. God comes in the form of a child born in our midst, to offer us hope and life.

The angels went to the Shepherds to announce the news. God is doing something new. God is coming even now, into this world, into your midst, to offer hope and healing. Go and see the sign, a child born in a manger, wrapped in the clothes of a baby."

And they get up to go see. They got up to go participate in this great, new event.

The question I find myself wondering about this Christmas, when so much seems to be going wrong in our world, is what about us. How are we going to respond to this news that God is at work and wants to help make our world a better place? Are we going to get up and go participate in this great event, on behalf of God? Or are we just going to sit back and let others try and solve the problems? Are we going to sit back and complain?

My hope is that we will take this Christmas story seriously and work, with God to bring about the kind of world we all long for. It is my hope that we will find ways to live our faith and share our faith in ways that are real and authentic that allows people to see God living in us.

One family learned how to take this Christmas story seriously, as if by chance. You see, the dad in this family, Mike, hated Christmas. He didn't hate the real meaning of Christmas. He just hated the way it had become commercialized. He hated the last minute running around. The buying a present for Uncle Harry whom he hardly ever talked with, those gifts given in desperation. That is what he hated.

Mary, his wife, decided that she wanted to do something different for him this year. She didn't want to get him a sweater or some other conventional gift. But at first, she didn't know what to do. Then she came up with an idea for gift for him through her son, Kevin, who was 12 at the time. In her own words, she says, "Kevin was wrestling at the junior level at the school he attended; and shortly before Christmas, there was a non-league match against a team sponsored by an inner-city church. These youngsters, dressed in sneakers so ragged that shoestrings seemed to be the only thing holding them together, presented a sharp contrast to our boys in their spiffy blue and gold uniforms and sparkling new wrestling shoes. As the match began, I was alarmed to see that the other team was wrestling without headgear, a kind of light helmet designed to protect a wrestler's ears. It was a luxury the ragtag team obviously could not afford. Well, we ended up walloping them. We took every weight class. And as each of their boys got up from the mat, he swaggered around in his tatters with false bravado, a kind of street pride that couldn't acknowledge defeat.

"Mike, seated beside me, shook his head sadly, 'I wish just one of them could have won,' he said. 'They have a lot of potential, but losing like this could take the heart right out of them.'

"Mike loved kids-all kids-and he knew them, having coached little league football, baseball and lacrosse. That's when the idea for his present came. That afternoon, I went to a local sporting goods store and bought an assortment of wrestling headgear and shoes and sent them anonymously to the inner-city church. On Christmas Eve, I placed the envelope on the tree, the note inside telling Mike what I had done and that

this was his gift from me. His smile was the brightest thing about Christmas that year and in succeeding years. For each Christmas, I followed the tradition---one year sending a group of mentally handicapped youngsters to a hockey game, another year a check to a pair of elderly brothers whose home had burned to the ground the week before Christmas, and on and on.

"The envelope became the highlight of our Christmas. It was always the last thing opened on Christmas morning and our children, ignoring their new toys, would stand with wide-eyed anticipation as their dad lifted the envelope from the tree to reveal its contents. As the children grew, the toys gave way to more practical presents, but the envelope never lost its allure. The story doesn't end there.

"A couple of years ago, Mike died from cancer. When Christmas rolled around, I was still so wrapped in grief that I barely got the tree up. But Christmas Eve found me placing an envelope on the tree, and in the morning, I was surprised to see that it was joined by three more. Each of our children, unbeknownst to the others, had placed an envelope on the tree for their dad. The tradition has grown and expanded even further with our grandchildren now standing around the tree with wide-eyed anticipation watching as their fathers take down the envelope. Mike's spirit, like the Christmas spirit, will always be with us."

I love that story. It reminds me that we can continue to be a part of what God is doing in this world. We can participate in God's great event to make the world a better place.

Sure, these are tough days. Sure, many of us feel lost by the challenges that have come upon us. But there is still time, even now, even tonight, to say yes to God and work to make the world a better place. What about you? What are you going to do?

May God help us live lives of faith.

Amen