

Christmas Eve 2006
12/24/2006

A few days before school started, I was in the usual routine, wondering who my teacher would be. I was a rising 6th grader at Glenwood Elementary School in Enid, Oklahoma. It was not so much that I cared who my teacher was. It was more that I demanded who would not be my teacher. I was deathly afraid of Mr. Johnson, a one in three possibility. The normal parade of middle aged women with unimposing calf-length skirts and pastel colored, lace-collared shirts would be quite sufficient. But not Mr. Johnson. Mr. Johnson was an imposing figure who seemed at least seven feet tall. He was dark haired and brooding. Mr. Johnson could have been the inspiration for our school mascot, the Glenwood Grizzlies. He slothily hunched through the halls, half bent over so that his tall frame could fit in the school's small corridors. His temper was also supposedly grizzly-like. There were accounts of excessive yelling. It was also rumored, though unconfirmed, that he had hit one pupil the previous year. When I saw my name: "Dyche, Bradley C." under "Johnson, Mark," I knew that I was in big trouble.

On the first day of school, had I not been so concerned about pre-pubescent appearances, I could have easily held onto my Father's pant-legs for help. Instead, I faced the fate of my 6th grade panicked terror with all the courage I could muster. For nine weeks, I kept my face down, knowing that Mr. Johnson could snap at any moment. Soon, I imagined that I was safe. I could easily pass by unnoticed, and my school work had gone well. The first round of grades was looming, but I was confident in my straight A self. During class one day, though, Mr. Johnson called us to attention and said, "If I read your name, it means that you have a failing grade in one or more subjects and need to talk with me after class." He began to read the names. "Allens, Buckles...." John Buckles was always getting bad grades. I knew that he would pass the "D's" any minute. I was self-assured. And then he said it, the name that I never loved hearing as a child, especially in such circumstances, "DYCHE."

My head was swimming; I was in a blur. Failing? In sixth grade? My mind flashed to angry parents and, worse, my permanent record. No college would accept me now. And when Mr. Johnson was through with me, I would be dead anyway, with cinder block shoes in an Oklahoma River.... I was a tad dramatic. I began to cry. In fact, I lost it. I could not control or conceal my tears. And Mr. Johnson saw me. He yelled out my name, "Brad! Go to the coat racks." I ran to the back, curled up amongst the warmth of the coats to compose myself. In a few minutes, the bell rang, and it was time for lunch. Everyone began to line up at the classroom door. But Mr. Johnson looked at me and said, "Not you!" He left while I just stood there. I feared the worst of what was to come.

A few minutes later, Mr. Johnson came back with his own lunch, and sat down at a table. He had a piping hot can of Campbell's Clam Chowder and a bag of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish. He made no eye contact, and I knew that the wrath was to come. He was simply gaining sustenance for the coming brutality. Instead, Mr. Johnson took out two bowls from his desk drawer and divided the soup into a bowl for me and a bowl for him. He put out a napkin and a spoon and sprinkled a pile of Pepperidge Farm Goldfish Crackers by my bowl. He motioned for me to sit down. He looked me in the eyes and said, "It is going to be alright. I know that you are a good student and that we

can work on this. Just eat.” With that, I finally trusted my new teacher for who he was, not the mistaken myths I had come to believe.

The message of Christmas is no different than that day with Mr. Johnson. In a world of people who believe that God is a terrifying, scary, and wrathful Creator. In a world that can often only react in fear to even the existence of God, God sends God’s son to show us that instead God only wants to be with us, love us, and share with us the abundance of God. And to do that, God does the equivalent of feeding a scared schoolboy with Pepperidge Farm Goldfish and canned clam chowder soup. Instead of standing at a hovering, heavenly height, God appears among us, so that we are not scared. God becomes vulnerable. And we are told that this lowly God in a manger is God’s true nature. Everything else has been a nightmare of our own making. God does not want to hold us to permanent records, and God will never adhere to traditional distinctions between heaven and earth. With the presence of Jesus in a manger, God amongst the animals, we are shown that God does not come to bring wrath to our world. Instead, he brings heaven. The teacher and the student come to a common table.

From the familiar Gospel reading of Luke we hear, “Do not be afraid... To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” And if we listen closely, we are being told about the irony of an all powerful God who comes to us not with anger but as a child, much like Mr. Johnson reached out to me that day. After all, “Savior” was the title usually accorded to Roman Emperors. The first readers of this gospel would have known that. “Messiah” was usually taken to mean a ruler-king. Jesus is even named after Joshua, who was a great military leader. And the whole story of the birth of Jesus is set with the backdrop of the Roman Empire. The first words are about Emperor Augustus and we are told about a Roman Census, which in the city of David caused a huge revolt by the Jewish Citizens. This seems like anything but good news. But we also see a contrasting picture begin to emerge: All these forms of authority, hierarchy, and domination, these methods of controlling societies that were thought to be from God, much like God’s wrath, are revealed to be nothing more than false myths. Instead, God is an innocent, vulnerable child.

And by this very action of our God, this God being “decked out in flesh,” God teaches us how to live with one another. We are shown how to see past the power of rulers of Rome. We are taught to see the Messiah in a child and not a king. And we are given the key to real power, which is not controlling one another, but serving one another, bringing heaven to others as Jesus brings it to us. And that is our lesson on this holy night. While much of our world operates like the myths of Mr. Johnson and the Roman Empire, while many of us live our lives in fear, our God takes a step down, wipes the tears from our eyes, feeds us, and fortifies us to go and do the same for others.

As we sit across the table with family members whom we love and the ones who annoy us and across the globe from those who wish us peace and those who wish us dead, the message of Christmas is this: trust that God is with us to love us, to bring us heaven, and believe that God wants us to do likewise for others.

Merry Christmas. May God bring you Pepperidge Farm Goldfish crackers and Clam Chowder soup, and may we all go and give likewise.