

“Missed Opportunities”

Luke 2:1-20

A Sermon by Rev. Dr. Ronald L. Farmer

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Early one cold winter’s morning, a man sat at a metro station in Washington DC, removed a violin and bow from a case, and started to play. He played six pieces by Johann Sebastian Bach and other great composers, which took 43 minutes. During the time he played, 1097 people passed through the station, most of them on their way to work.

Three minutes went by before a middle-aged man noticed there was a musician playing. He slowed his pace and stopped for a few seconds before hurrying along to keep on schedule. A minute later, the violinist received his first dollar tip: a woman dropped the money in his open case and, without stopping, continued to walk. A few minutes later, a man leaned against the wall to listen for a moment, but then looked at his watch and hurried along. Clearly, he was late for work.

The one who paid the most attention to the musician was a three-year-old boy. He stopped, transfixed. His mother tugged on his arm, but the child remained in place, listening to the beautiful music. Frustrated, his mother tugged harder, and the child began to walk, but continued to look over his shoulder at the musician. Interestingly, this action was repeated by several other children, but all the parents, without exception, forced their children to move along.

In the 43 minutes the violinist played, only six people stopped to listened for a while. About 20 gave the musician money but continued to walk at their normal pace. He collected \$32. When he finished playing and silence took over the subway stop, no one seemed to notice. No one applauded.

No one knew this at the time, but the violinist was Joshua Bell, one of the most famous violists in the world. For 43 minutes, he played some of the most intricate pieces of music ever written on a Stradivarius violin worth 3.5 million dollars. Two days earlier Symphony Hall in Boston, Bell had played a sold-out concert where the seats average \$100.00 each.

This is a true story.¹ Joshua Bell playing incognito in the metro station was organized by *The Washington Post* as part of a social experiment about the perception, taste, and priorities of people. They were researching the following questions: In a commonplace environment and at an inconvenient hour, do we perceive beauty? Do we stop to appreciate it? Do we recognize extraordinary talent in an unexpected context? If we do not have a moment to stop and listen to one of the finest musicians in the world playing some of the most beautiful music ever written on one of the most valuable musical instruments ever crafted, how many other things in life are we missing?

This morning, we've listened once again to Luke's familiar Christmas Story. Jesus—the long-awaited Messiah—came into the world when people were frantically rushing around, trying to meet a governmental census deadline so that the occupying conquerors, the Romans, could create a more accurate tax roll. Mary, an unwed mother traveling with her stressed out fiancé to his family's home town to be enrolled for the census, gave birth to the Christ-Child in a common, every-day stable, surrounded by gentle farm animals. Not having a proper cradle, she lay the holy infant in a lowly manger. This most momentous event—the Advent of the long-awaited Messiah—went totally unnoticed by the masses because the event appeared to be so ordinary: an ordinary location—a lowly stable rather than a splendid palace or temple; at an inconvenient time—the taking of the census; and in an everyday way—the birth of a baby rather than a victorious military conqueror riding a magnificent white charger at the head of a vast army.

Yes, because of the seemingly ordinariness of that first Christmas, missed opportunities abounded that night. On a purely mundane level, think of the innkeeper who missed the opportunity of a lifetime; can't you just picture the marvelous marketing campaign he could have had if he hadn't turned away the pregnant couple? "When you're in the Jerusalem metro area, spend the night where the Messiah was born!" Yes, missed opportunities abounded that night. Why, it literally took "an act of God" to gain the attention of the shepherds!

But even sadder is the fact that missed opportunities still abound, even among those who know—or think they know—the Christmas story. But in the birth of the Christ-Child, God, the master violinist as it were, was playing the melody of heaven. Yet how many people today—even at Christmas time—pause and listen to the beautiful music? Fortunately, for those who do, for those "with ears to hear" as Jesus was fond of saying to his disciples, the music of heaven still invites us to discover fresh rebirthings of hope, peace, joy, and love in our daily lives—as anticipated by our Advent Candles.

This year, let us be sure to take time to pause in our frantic holiday preparations and activities—in the frantic pace of everyday life—to stop and listen for that sweet heavenly music which is found most frequently in life's humble places—everyday places, ordinary places; at home, at work; in the fields, in the kitchen; in friendships, in family gatherings. If we pause and listen, we might just hear the marvelous melody of heaven.

And that's today's good news. Amen.

¹ Gene Weingarten, "Pearls before Breakfast: Can one of the nation's greatest musicians cut through the fog of a D.C. rush hour? Let's find out." *The Washington Post* (April 8, 2007).