

Urban Christian Outreach (Ottawa)

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And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Luke 2:6-11 ESV

As I compose this newsletter sitting in a warm coffee shop, I am moved by the tune playing above me: John Lennon's "Imagine". The melody is comforting, but the lyrics just don't work for me. Instead of the words: "Imagine all the people living for today", in my heart I am singing "Imagine all the people living for Jesus". Imagine that all God's children were warm, safe and loved. Imagine, if you will, that there were no homeless, lonely or marginalized people among us. Imagine being in Bethlehem at the time of Christ's birth and staring into the face of the newborn Jesus. Imagine the Church as Jesus imagined it. I dream of this. Perhaps you share my dream. I dream of a

Christian community where the fruit of the Holy Spirit is so evident, where love is a verb and where it originates from a heart so full of joy that it can't help but overflow onto others; a community where we look at one another with the eyes of Christ and the heart of Christ, and see Jesus in one another.

I dream of a time that I might be able to say to the pregnant, single mom moving in and out of shelters: "*Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him,*" and be able to follow through that very day in a tangible way, with a warm bed in a safe, quiet place, away from drugs and temptation, away from the chaos that ensues, and into the arms of a Christian community who will surround her with love and hope; love without judgment, love without rejection: a place where she can be still, and dare to know God. I pray that our Lord would turn her fear into faith. To know her story is to understand that it makes sense that she is where she is today. Rejected by her family, assaulted in foster care, pregnant too soon, she wanders in fear, not staying too long in one place. She knows that she won't be able to take care of her baby, and has already begun to say her goodbyes.

In some ways, she reminds me of Mary, mother of Jesus, pregnant before marriage, and possibly fearing rejection herself.

And of Jesus, rejected from birth: by Herod, by his community, by his disciples and since then by millions. Perhaps you know the pain of rejection or exclusion, the sting of slander, or the distress caused by careless words spoken. Perhaps this wounding began when you were still in the womb and words of dread were spoken over you; perhaps it was from birth when you were placed for adoption, or from a sibling or a schoolyard bully. Perhaps you have been rejected by a teacher, a colleague, a friend, a spouse, your child, your pastor or a member of your church family. Words can hurt, and so can body language: your rejection may have come in the form of a shunning; possibly from a rolling of one's eyes, or a deep sigh or a shaking of a head. Some whom we serve are not able to read the pages of a book, and yet they excel at reading body language. Perhaps your rejection came from being different, because of the way that you appear. Perhaps your suffering comes from failing to fit into society's 'norms': the pain of being too short, or too tall, too fat or too thin. We live in a world that is often unkind to those who are different; few escape the pain of rejection. We are bombarded with media messages telling us that we are not good enough, but in God's eyes we are **more** than good enough. Our Father, our creator knows our hearts; he created them. He looks beyond our brokenness. He sees our potential. He sees the potential of the poor. Our Father in heaven loves us and wants to give us new hearts. In first John, chapter 4 and verse 7, it is written:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is

love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." ESV

He invites us to receive healing, setting us free from the bondage that Satan would snarl us with. He plucks us from our battles and He washes us clean. He restores and redeems us and challenges us with words taken from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 6, verse 27:

But I say to you who hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you. ESV

Many of those whom we serve in our ministry work know the pain of rejection well. People have let them down, and some are mature enough to admit that they too have let others down. Governments have let them down. We all fall so short of God's glory. But God, in his infinite mercy, reaches down and lifts them up and sets their feet on higher ground – level and equal to all brothers and sisters in Christ. By His grace, He delights to include all of us in his family. He restores us to our rightful place, not because we are entitled, but because God is glorified when we are restored. He is glorified when we are redeemed. He is glorified when we partner with Him in the ministry of forgiveness and reconciliation. Oh that we might honour Him and each other by our willingness first to sit with him and to allow Him to give us new hearts: hearts for Him and hearts to forgive one another. By grace, he invites us to be cleansed, to be born again, born of the Holy Spirit.

Because of your faithfulness in supporting the ministry work of UCO, I am able to spend time with this those who, like the young pregnant woman, suffer. Because

you partner with us, I am able to point them to the one who created them, the one who knows the number of hairs on their heads, the one who will never reject them, never leave them, never forsake them: our Father in heaven, and to a relationship with Jesus, the one who intercedes on their behalf, the one who died so that they might live, the one who was, who is and who is coming again, soon, and to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, the one who is their comforter, the one who will lead them into all truth.

reject his perfect gift – the gift of Jesus, and when we fail to share the reason that we have faith and joy. Let's pray, asking the Holy Spirit to fill us with joy, so that others will see the joy that we have within us and that they might become seekers themselves. This is a time to celebrate: Advent: the coming of Jesus on that first Christmas morning, and the next Advent: the second coming of Jesus that we can look forward to.



As I meditate on the first Christmas and on Jesus growing inside Mary's womb, I think of the word 'Emmanuel', meaning 'God with us'. God was with Mary; she carried him in her womb and God is also with us. God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit: Three in one. We carry God, the Holy Spirit within us, just as Mary carried God the Son within her. Our bodies are temples or dwelling places for the Holy Spirit. Mary was blessed and we are blessed. Is this not the greatest gift? The gift of Christmas: Jesus: born to die; born to live again: born to make a way to the Father, for us. A hand-made gift to us, made with the Father's hands. A gift so precious, so costly, and yet given to us so freely. How the Father weeps when we

We represent a God of infinite chances. Let's look for him in everything, asking 'Lord, where are you in this?...as we do the dishes, we can give thanks for the food that God has provided and that we have dishes to wash; we can think of the waters of baptism washing us clean, restoring us and we can pray for those who need His redeeming grace. As we shop for Christmas gifts, we can remember the gift of Christ that we have been given, and remember those without. As we wrap our gifts, we can remember the infant Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloth and invite Jesus to come and wrap his arms around us, around those whom we love, around the poor. We can remember Jesus – God's greatest gift to us.

As we gather with loved ones, we can look for the presence of the Holy Spirit in them, pray for those who are without. We can invite Jesus into every moment, every conversation, asking "Lord, what would you have me do? What words of encouragement can I speak?" We can then be still before Him, with the expectation of an answer, praying for ears to hear him, wisdom to understand Him and provision to carry out His will. Christ – born for us, born again in us. Emmanuel: God with us, through the Holy Spirit. Pray that we might become aware of the leading of The Holy Spirit. Please pray that we might be obedient like Jesus, as it is written in the Gospel of John, chapter 8 and verse 28:

So Jesus said to them, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own authority, but speak just as the Father taught me. And he who sent me is with me. He has not left me alone, for I always do the things that are pleasing to him." ESV

A UCO client shared a story with me a few weeks ago, and has given me permission to share it with you. Martin (not his real name) is homeless, and lives in a downtown shelter. He spends his days looking for work and for housing that he can afford on his small disability allowance. One day recently, as he sat on the steps of the legislature on Parliament Hill, enjoying the sun, he encountered two women climbing the stairs next to where he sat. Martin said to them: "You can do it girls!" The women smiled and stopped to ask him if there was something they could do for him. "Five minutes of conversation would be wonderful", Martin replied. They kindly obliged him by sitting and chatting with him for five minutes. Five minutes of their time – what a precious gift! Martin's face lit up as he retold the story.

What a precious gift we can give to Jesus – the gift of our time. Wise men spent a great amount of time traveling to sit with Jesus. Shepherds stopped working in the fields to sit with Jesus. The disciples gave three years to sit with Jesus while he was with them. We are invited to accept the invitation to sit with Jesus this Christmas season, to gaze upon his beautiful face, to sense the holiness of his presence.

It is my prayer for you that the joy of being in a relationship with Jesus would fill your heart to overflowing this Christmas, that you would dance around your homes with delight, that you would not only be blessed by his presence but that you would be a blessing to Him as well. Could His rod and His staff be drawing you near today; perhaps at this very moment? As you sit still before our Lord, ask him to speak words of comfort to your hearts, through thoughts, images and Holy Scripture. Pray for the ears to hear Him. He is truly all we need this Christmas. Ask and He will bless you. As the Holy Spirit leads you, please pray for the poor, asking him how he might use you to bless the poor during this Christmas season. If you or someone you know needs the gift of Christ this Christmas season, I would invite you to call me and leave a message at 613-233-6633. I will be checking messages frequently this season and would be honoured to pray with or for you, confidentially.

As I prayed over and pondered the words that Christ would have me write, the image of Jesus preparing a table for us appeared before me: communion with Jesus; his provision, sufficient not only today, but for eternity; Jesus, in the midst of our celebration; Jesus, the reason for our celebration; Jesus, our celebration.

Towards the end of this newsletter, I am including a poem that my late father wrote. I was just a child when he passed away, but I give thanks and praise to my Heavenly Father that He blessed my earthly father with the saving grace of Jesus Christ. It is comforting to know that one day we will be reunited in Heaven. I know this because our Lord is faithful and His promises to us are truthful. He said so and therefore we believe.

On behalf of the poor, the homeless and the marginalized whom we so gratefully serve and on behalf of our dedicated servant Board of Directors, I thank God for all of you and for your servant hearts, and I wish you and those whom you love a joyful, Christ-filled Christmas and a prosperous New Year.

With love in Christ,
Jill Wilson
Executive Director

From UCO's President of the Board:

It has been a pleasure to work with the board of Urban Christian Outreach over the past year. Our ministry has prospered and we have been grateful to our faithful supporters, who make it possible for Jill to step out in love on behalf of us all. As Christmas approaches, we appeal to you once again to remember us in your prayers and to consider making a donation to the work. We pray that you will experience all of God's blessings at this special season.

Janice Fiamengo

A Christmas Verse

By George Potter

We've had time to enjoy the wonders of Christmas
We've been privileged to give and to share
The children were wide eyed in breathless suspense
All our cries of delight filled the air
We've enjoyed old carols, old customs, old friends
And shortbread and cookies and cake
And toy filled stockings and presents and wreaths
That we all worked together to make
Now it's time for roast turkey and cranberry sauce
And white meat and dressing and such
Drumsticks and candles and pudding aflame
And the pleasure of eating too much
But let's stop for a moment and give a thought
To the reason we're happy and gay
The babe in the manger, three Wiseman, the shepherds
The star on that first Christmas day
Let's have good will and peace in our hearts
And thoughts for loved ones dear
And carry some of our Christmas Spirit
Inside us all next year

*For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" Luke 2:11-14
ESV*