



Sermon Preached by Rev. Dr. Gregory Knox Jones
Scripture: Isaiah 9:2, 6 and 7
“A Letter from Jesus”
December 20, 2009

When I opened last year’s letter from Jesus, the financial markets had recently collapsed and most of us were on edge. The economic tsunami was rushing around the globe leaving a trail of devastation in its wake. The greed of a few was creating misery for many. Some of us had seen our lifetime savings pummeled; others feared receiving a pink slip and being escorted to the door. Our hearts held out hope for a quick turnaround, but we also began to brace ourselves for further storms. To our surprise and our sadness, the harshest blow our church family sustained had nothing to do with the economy.

Last year I was eager to get his letter, this year I was more subdued. I found myself guarding my emotions so as not to become too disappointed if I didn’t hear anything. But the letter arrived a couple of days ago, so I’d like to share it with you.

He writes,

Dear Children, 2009 has been a harsh year. Global food shortages have taken the lives of many of your brothers and sisters in developing nations. The AIDS epidemic continues to create scores of orphans. Terrorism and war maim, kill and ravage the earth. The economic crisis robs people of their livelihoods.

While your own nation has not experienced the devastation that many around the world have endured, your country has also been enveloped by darkness. Millions are out of work and out of their homes. Each day more people find themselves without health care. There have been mass shootings and senseless killings. Young men and women are sent halfway around the world to wage two wars.

As I wept over the city of Jerusalem nearly 2,000 years ago, I weep for the world today. I weep for each person who is in pain, everyone in the clutches of evil, everyone who is lost or afraid or who has given up hope for a better day.

I weep for your church family. The economic crisis continues to cause hardship but not as devastating as Chad’s premature death. You have felt shock and anger, sadness and emptiness. Never forget that I suffer with you and seek to lessen your loss. I want to heal you by sharing part of your

pain, by connecting you to others who grieve, by encouraging you to honor Chad with your way of living and by promising you that this life is not all there is.

Our loving Parent does not intend for 30 year-olds to drown, for 40 year-olds to divorce, for 50 year-olds to lose their jobs, for 60 year-olds to lose their homes for 70 year-olds to lose their savings or for 80 year-olds to lose their memories. But a world that is free, not previously determined, involves risks. Freedom infuses life with vitality. It brings you purpose and joy and adventure. But freedom also makes life dangerous. Every choice has a consequence.

When Chad and his brother drowned, tears flowed and dreams vanished. Each of them still had much kindness to share, a fire in their hearts for justice and a determination to spread peace. I trust their deaths reawakened you to the fact that life is precious and your opportunity to become the person God wants you to become can end in a flash.

I hope you will remember how essential it is to step out of the daily rush, and to step into worship. Here is where you recapture your ability to see the big picture. In the 21st century, life comes at you with such mind-numbing speed and from so many different angles that you can quickly lose your bearing, and even the finest GPS cannot get you back on the right path. You must seize moments of meditation to hear the timeless wisdom of Scripture reminding you what makes life rich: building loving relationships, forgiving people who hurt you, being generous with your resources, standing up for those who are mistreated, winning over adversaries, extending compassion to people who are hurting and working tirelessly for peace.

After the year you've had, I don't need to remind you that life is not always joyful or friendly. Pain and problems are part of the package. How you handle them makes all the difference. Do not let hard times make you hard. Deepen your faith and your courage will grow. You will discover the fortitude to stand strong in the face of adversity and the courage to step forward into the unknown.

As you are drawing near to celebrating my birth, remember what the angels said to the shepherds out in the fields: "Do not be afraid." That is my primary message to you this year: "Do not be afraid." God spoke these words to Abraham before establishing the covenant; Moses rallied the Hebrew people with these words when they were escaping their oppressors; the angel Gabriel counseled my mother with these words when she became pregnant; and the same words were spoken to the shocked women at my empty tomb.

Do not be afraid because fear induces paralysis. Fear prevents you from stepping into tomorrow, from climbing as high as possible, from loving unconditionally, from opposing evil, from getting back up after you've been knocked down and from embarking on the spiritual adventure I want you to live.

Fear can cripple you. It can turn you cynical and make you mean. Fear can diminish your relationships and decimate your health. Fear that you don't have enough leads to greed. Fear that you are unworthy leads to jealousy. Fear of failure leads to surrender. Fear of death leads to despair.

Do not be afraid. Difficulties will not disappear, but I will be by your side. Obstacles will still arise, but I will be near to guide you. Challenges will test you, but I will give you courage to persevere. Do not be afraid. The darkness will not disappear, but it will never extinguish my light. You have my word on that.

Oh, and one last thing. In the coming year, let's keep in better touch.