

Life is full of struggles and burdens isn't it? People can be difficult and disappointing. So growing up isn't easy. Nor school! Nor marriage! Raising children is no piece of cake either, and it's doesn't get any easier when they're grown; the problems only change. Then, there are struggles at work and issues with the wider family. I could go on and on! There's no end to the struggles and worries!

Well, the weight of these burdens can make us very self-absorbed, self-protective, and selfish. Make us pull back, do only what we have to do, be involved only where we have to be, and forget the rest. Make us try to lift ourselves above the burdens, to get the resources that will free us from them all.

That's understandable! With all of life's hassles, why take on more! Because, one thing for sure, the more involved you are, the more you care, the more struggles and conflicts you'll have, the more you'll suffer. So, sometimes, I think about a simpler pastorate - no mission trips, church camp, safe church policies, staff issues, or concern for the integrity of worship; just do a sermon, appear at a few gatherings, say some encouraging words, and let it go at that. No hard choices to make, no stands to take, no mistakes or misunderstandings to pay a price for, no conflict, no anger! Sounds great!

Through the centuries, this impulse to avoid all the struggle and pain has made a certain image of god very attractive. It imagines a god so far above human frailty, so pure, so holy, as to be totally removed from concern about, or involvement in, our difficulties. This image of god has offered a great justification to be the same way ourselves - distant, removed, and above - all the cares of life.

This supposedly "divine excuse" has justified aloofness, even in the church, leading us to think there is no reason to know, much less care about, our fellow "believers," no reason to share in fellowship, much less ministry and mission. So, Sunday School for us or our kids, can be hit-or-miss, special times like retreats, camp, Bible School, and Christmas pageants, ignored; if neither we nor they ever gain a sense of being part of a faith family, who cares? The faith family, itself, doesn't matter!

Often, this aloofness is just apathy, a lack interest in anything beyond our own individual, personal religion. Sometimes, too, it's rooted in a sense of spiritual superiority, a belief that the faith family is too weak, flawed, unfaithful, to be worthy of our involvement. So, gifts are withheld, gifts of presence, time, talent, treasure, because the faith family isn't worthy of concern, effort, or sharing.

But tonight, all of these justifications for non-involvement, all of these rationalizations for aloofness, all these excuses for arrogant superiority, have been blown out of the water. And God, the true God, is the one that's done it! God has said, "Don't use me as an excuse not to care or give yourself to one another!" God's done something that's confronted, and revealed all our excuses for aloofness and lack of care for each other, for what they are - selfish, unjustified, arrogant, inexcusable! Tonight, we're shown that the god image we've used to justify our separation from one another is a lie.

We see who God really is. We see a God who refuses to let his goodness and holiness and our sin and evil keep us apart. Who refuses to withhold, who can't stay away, who has to be involved, totally involved, in the struggles, burdens, messiness and pain, of our life. Who'll go to any length, stoop to any level, to be involved with us! Who takes on our flesh, our human frailty, and dwells with us!

And, far from being a sign of weakness, this taking on our frailty, this stooping to our level, shows this God's greatest strength. It's the supreme sign of this God's transcendent power, power shown in refusing to stay distant and apart, power shown in bridging, in "transcending," all that separates us.

This God's greatest power is in stooping to our weakness.

A sure sign of someone who really loves children is that they don't talk down to them, but are willing to "stoop," to bend over, to kneel down, and share. That's what this God does with us, for us, tonight.

It takes a strong, secure love to stoop. One of the issues of love is just how much to get involved. If

you've ever reached out to someone, made yourself vulnerable, only to have that person reject your care, turn on you in anger, or betray you, you know; it hurts! It makes you hesitate the next time.

Yet, real love takes that risk. It has the strength and courage to risk disappointment, rejection or pain.

I remember being told in a life-saving course that "drowning people tend to drown their saviors." So, if someone's in trouble in the water, throw them something, reach for them, but don't jump in!

As a pastor, I often think about that advice from my life-saving class. Jump in to help someone who's troubled, in great pain, or angry, speak a truth that's hard to hear, and you may get hurt. Desperate, hurting, or bitter people can be hard on those who care. They may resent your efforts, not see it as care at all, push you away, attack you, try to pull you under. Getting involved can be dangerous!

What we do to the one born this night makes that clear. It also makes what God has done so amazing. God being so good, so great, we being so flawed, so capable of evil, God could've held back. But God loves us too much for that. No risk or pain is too great for God. We can never sink too low for God to stoop to save us. That's what stooping to be born to a poor family in a dirty stable shows us!

What passionate, reckless love! The word *passion* comes from the Latin, *to suffer*. During Lent we focus on "Jesus' passion," his bearing the cross, his showing his love for us through his suffering.

Yet, his "passion" didn't have to wait till he hung on the cross. His passion, his reckless willingness to suffer with us, to suffer for us and because of us, is there from the start. This God is secure enough to be moved by our needs, to jump into our struggles, to stand beside us, to be there for us, to suffer and die for us. We know this God loves us because this God willingly bears such pain – for us!

His recklessness, his willingness to risk and suffer doesn't negate his divinity, but proves it. Only a limitless God could love in such a limitless way.

Tonight we're shown so much that's great about God. But we're also shown something wonderful about us! We're shown that we're too precious to God for God to let us stay lost in our messes. So, God comes to us in the midst of them, to bring us back, to restore the relationship which is our hope.

Because of the humble birth we celebrate tonight, we have hope for life. That's why we sing!

### **HYMN – *Joy to the World***

#### **PRAYER**

Lord God, we are full of joy, for you have come to us in Jesus.

You were not content to be God alone, unbothered, unworried, unsoiled by the messes we make.

You bridged all the things that separate us, keep us distant,

...because, messed up as we are, we are still your children, and you still want us to be your family.

So you took on our flesh, our humanity so we might be touched, healed, made new by your divinity.

Thank you for coming to be with us, to stand beside us.

For all you've given us, so we might share with each other, we give you thanks and praise.

Because you've shown how much you care and are willing to be involved,

...we trust that you will help us to care and be involved ourselves.

So we ask you to heal us of all that keeps us aloof, refusing to be involved in your world,

...or in the struggles and failings of your children, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our faith family,

...be it selfish, self-concern, simple apathy, or arrogant feelings of spiritual superiority.

Because in your great gift this night you have shown us your fullness compassion and care,

...we pray that you would protect the vulnerable, and bless the burdened and the weary,

...and that you would give strength and support for those who are struggling during this time.

We ask all this with hope because of the wonders, and wonders, of your love. Amen.