

Series: WHEN GOD CHOSE WEAKNESS—Dec. 13, 2009

JESUS...AND POVERTY
Luke 2:1-7; 2 Corinthians 8:9; Luke 12:32-34

1. Recently I spent a weekend with Jim, a very close friend of mine who lives in Pennsylvania. Jim **knows** coal mines. His Dad worked them, he's worked them—and now he serves as a federal mine inspector—which means he leaves home every morning at 3:30 a.m. and spends most of his day about 500 feet underground in tunnels

-When Jim and I were having breakfast last week, he said, "You know, a lot of guys **think** they'd like to work in the mines—because it pays well. But I tell them they need to actually go **into** a mine before you sign up to work in one!" Anyone here who's ever been in an underground coal mine? It's pitch black, damp--and the ceiling is about 3 feet high. If you're short—that works. But if you're 6' 1"—like Jim—that could be a problem.

-I know Jim **really** well, but I don't know his world. I've lived in coal-mining towns—and went into a mine shaft once. Jim has shown me pictures of the mine on his cell phone. But I don't know what it's like to go into a mine day after day after day. To understand **anything** fully—you have to experience it.

2. Christmas celebrates the time when God chose to **experience** what it was like to be a weak, ordinary human being. As God surveyed the devastation sin had left in its wake on this planet—the burden of suffering and pain and injustice and cruelty and need—He decided to act. He **knew** our experience—because He's God—and He **knows** things like that—shame, hopelessness, cancer, death—even things like AIDS. -But the Son took it way further. He did what no one would **ever** expect God to do. To save us—to make **everything** the way it was created to be, **He** went to the mine. **He** stepped into this mess we created--as a Savior—as the Son of God.

-Paul, an early leader and writer in the Movement of Jesus, talks about this. He says:

Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave and was born as a human being. (Philippians 2:5-7 NLT)

-I want you to just imagine the Son—standing on the cusp of eternity, ready to enter time as a cluster of multiplying cells in a teenage girl's womb. Can you even **imagine** what He was leaving behind? Limitless power and joy and love. He came to a world undetected; for 9 months, he would be encased in warm fluid; then squeezed into a cold, hard world of helplessness and dependency. God—incognito. Luke, a Greek physician and early biographer of the way of Jesus says these unforgettable words:

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. And because Joseph was a descendant of King David,

he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. He took with him Mary, his fiancée, who was now obviously pregnant. And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. She gave birth to her first child, a son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. (Luke 2:1-7 NLT)

- a. I've learned some things recently about how different this scene actually was from what you and I have seen on Christmas cards. In essence, we've created a whole barn out of a manger. Because Bethlehem was crowded due to the census—Joseph and Mary were likely staying with people. The *inn* was more like a guest room—and it was filled. So they stayed—and Jesus was likely born—in the utility room under the main house where people did household chores. And that's where Jesus was born—and laid in a movable stone manger—there for the animals that occasionally drifted in and out—kinda like our pets would.

-What's happening is that Luke is simply describing how *ordinary* Jesus' birth was—especially compared to the circumstances surrounding the birth of most prominent ruler of that day; Caesar Augustus.

- b. Sometimes we're tempted to rewrite Jesus' story to make it fit how *we* think things should be. Jesus has been described by televangelists as having been incredibly wealthy—and by social activists as a kind of first century Che Guevara—and by advocates for the poor as a street person who lived in abject poverty.

-The truth is, as best as we can see it through the stories, is that Jesus' life was extremely ordinary. If Joseph and Mary had a photo album, it would show the home they had in Bethlehem, the place they stayed in Egypt—and, especially, the home in Nazareth where Jesus was raised with four brothers and several sisters. Really, very simple—but nothing out of the ordinary for that culture.

-Joseph had a small business as a *tekton*—or skilled craftsman--most likely in stone. Jesus apprenticed with him—probably starting at about 10—and eventually was known for years as a carpenter in Nazareth. Both Joseph and Jesus may have been employed in Herod's massive rebuild of a city called *Sepphoris*—just a few miles from Nazareth. Now, here's my point: Although Jesus' family would've been considered extremely poor by *our* standards in this part of Canada, they would've been considered middle class in their world.

-Something that's always blown me away is that the people of Nazareth apparently saw *nothing* extraordinary about Jesus—whom they know as the local carpenter—or builder. Somewhere around the age of 30, when Jesus initiated His ministry, his neighbors were *shocked!* This guy—who went to work everyday, invoiced us, paid bills, lived with his family—the *Messiah?* No way! We know him—he's the carpenter—Mary's boy!" No one says a thing about Jesus being the Mother Theresa of Nazareth.

- c. Now, why am I saying this? Jesus took his first step from the breathtaking richness and power as the Son of God—owner of **everything**—right down into the mess of the ordinary. And then after 30 years in ordinary life, he took another downwardly mobile step; He took on the life of a traveling Rabbi, left his home, job, possessions—everything—behind.

-Paul, this early church leader I quote all the time writes:

You know the generous grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty he could make you rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9 NLT)

3. When you watch and listen to Jesus—you find a common theme throughout His life—the same one you see in God’s heart all through the Old Testament. It’s one of a deep compassion for the last, the lost, and the least. People whose lives have been devastated by poverty and sin and brokenness of all kinds. People with **no one** to help or care.

-Jesus lived in a culture that was **filled** with poverty. People were losing their jobs and land due to the tax system—and had to do things—like work construction—to eke out a living.

- a. See, in that culture, like some cultures today, it really didn’t matter how hard you worked. You couldn’t get ahead. Jesus saw how, in his world, the rich—who, for the most part had gotten rich in corrupt ways—just kept getting richer, and the poor just kept getting poorer. He saw people—born blind or crippled—whose only option was to beg for a living. He saw widows and orphans oppressed. He saw people in want; people who didn’t have enough food; people for whom daily life was a relentless struggle; a burden, really.
- b. As the Messiah—He had come to end the selfishness and cruelty of human beings—using and crushing others to get what they want—and return things to **the way they should be**. All through history, God had been **very** clear on how to treat the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens. He strictly forbid his people to oppress them. In fact, they were to be generous and compassionate. To **love** their neighbors. To be the voice of the voiceless—and protect the vulnerable. A life pleasing to God was **very** much connected to loving others—not just keeping the **thou shalt not!** In fact, this was at the heart of wisdom. Solomon said:

***...Blessed are those who help the poor. (Proverbs 14:21 NLT)**

***Those who oppress the poor insult their Maker, but helping the poor honors him. (Proverbs 14:31 NLT)**

***Those who mock the poor insult their Maker... (Proverbs 17:5 NLT)**

***If you help the poor, you are lending to the Lord—and he will repay you! (Proverbs 19:17 NLT)**

***Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need. (Proverbs 21:13 NLT)**

***Whoever gives to the poor will lack nothing, but those who close their eyes to poverty will be cursed. (Proverbs 28:27 NLT)**

***The godly care about the rights of the poor; the wicked don't care at all. (Proverbs 29:7 NLT)**

4. To some extent, the religious professionals of Jesus day understood the connection between how their ancestors had treated the poor—and them being sent into captivity. So they institutionalized tithing and giving money to the poor. --not because they really cared—but because they were afraid of getting sent into captivity again.

- And they had learned to actually leverage giving to the poor, as Jesus made clear, to enhance their own reputations—and then judge others. See the sickness of it? Loving others *still* circled back to loving themselves.

- a. Jesus cuts through all of this stuff with two basic commands—on which all the others could hang. **Love God with all you are...and love your neighbor as yourself.** And that's pretty all-encompassing, isn't it? See, God loves *all* people, no matter where they are, but or what they do. But His heart especially goes out to the vulnerable. The people who, simply because of where they were born, get shoved aside and live in want of something every single day. -Jesus words were *very* simple when it came to the poor.

He *de-institutionalized* generosity and said to those who followed Him, "You can do something. **Help them out!** Sell some of your stuff if you have to." Jesus told a story one day about a rich fool—who had *way* more than he could ever use—and all he could think about is how to stockpile it for the future. Then he spoke to a question we can relate to; "Will I have enough?" Jesus said:

"So don't be afraid, little flock. For it gives your Father great happiness to give you the Kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to those in need. This will store up treasure for you in heaven! And the purses of heaven never get old or develop holes. Your treasure will be safe; no thief can steal it and no moth can destroy it. Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." (Luke 12:32-34 NLT)

- b. There was another guy—who had *everything* that people look for; wealth, youth, and power. And, unlike many others, he had played by the rules. Except one; the first commandment, actually. **Have no other gods before me!** Jesus *loved* him! Jesus didn't want to see a man like this lose his soul over something as stupid as money and stuff, so He challenged him: **"...There is still one thing you haven't done. Sell all your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." (Luke 18:22 NLT)**

- c. But Jesus most profound call to care for the hungry, thirsty, naked and oppressed comes at the end of the very last public talk He gave. He says that the final separation at the end of time will have to do with whether or not we have shown tangible love and compassion to people he calls ***the least of these my brothers***. The huge, final shocker is that when we cared for people in desperate need—we are caring for ***Him***. And when we turn away--for whatever reason--we are turning away from ***Him***.

In fact, Jesus tied this kind of compassion into His mission on this planet. Right in the synagogue in Nazareth, he claimed for himself the prophecy spoken by Isaiah:

“The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, for he has anointed me to bring Good News to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the oppressed will be set free, and that the time of the LORD’s favor has come.” (Luke 4:18-19 NLT)

-Now, the interesting thing is that Jesus ***didn’t*** defeat the Romans and take the Jewish throne. He was crucified by the Romans. Would it have been Good News for the poor that after a life of suffering here, they could one day live in this renewed Kingdom right here—and the King of this Kingdom would bring justice to those who crushed them, stole their land, and oppressed them?

-Could it be that this ***Good News*** was the fact that Jesus, through the Spirit, would create a growing army of people who had transformed, softened hearts who would ***flood*** the earth? People who saw life through God’s eyes—and lived by a totally different value system? People who would live as salt and light—and glorify God by the way they loved—so much so that everyone would be attracted by their compassion and generosity and sacrifice—and ask, ***what’s up with THEM?*** That would be ***Good News*** to our world, wouldn’t it?

5. Think about our world for a few minutes. I think you know about the overwhelming need—right here in Toronto, surprisingly—and all over the world.. In preparation for this message, I read this book by Richard Stearns—entitled, ***The Hole In Our Gospel***. I went through a wide range of emotions as I read about his personal journey—and about the massive need in our world. In some places I felt joy; in others I felt overwhelming sadness. I got angry, I cried, I felt ashamed.

-Stearns says, imagine hearing on the news later on this afternoon—that not one, but a ***hundred*** jets had crashed, killing everyone on board. How many of you think that would be a blip on the news? No one with a brain would be watching The Simpsons, or CSI Miami. Everyone would be alerted; every nation would be involved.

-But tomorrow, Monday—there’s another news flash that 100 ***more*** have also crashed. And this happens Tuesday, Wednesday—every day. Can you imagine the chaos and airline companies and FAA—all the people trying to figure out ***what*** in the world is going on. And ***yet...*** The equivalent of that happens every day as 26,500 ***children*** die of preventable causes—all related to poverty. It happened yesterday, today—and it will happen tomorrow. And by next year at this time—10 million children will be

dead. Those figures are **numbing** aren't they? We think, "I can't even begin to process that—let alone do anything about it!"

- a. Stearns, the President of World Vision International says that **he** has difficulty processing this, too. He says that even with knowing this and seeing this—it is altogether possible for him to just keep doing his job with a sense of detachment." (p. 109). What pulls him out of this vacuum is sitting with a Mom—grieving because she's dying of AIDS and will leave 5 kids; or seeing a little girl rescued from prostitution. And **then** it becomes **very** personal again.
- b. The stats on poverty are mind-blowing. You've heard some of them. That 40% of the world's population—about 2.6 billion people—live less than \$2 a day—compared to our \$150 a day. And a billion people live on less than \$1 a day. A hundred years ago, wealthy nations had about 4 times as much as poor ones. That has grown to us having 75 times what people in poorer nations have.

-One of the things I have come to realize is that the resentment this has caused fuels a **lot** of conflict. It's one of the main recruiting techniques for Al Qaeda. Jimmy Carter, who has had **huge** exposure to our world, said that if we want peace, we will have to somehow bridge this gap.

-One of the problems is that poverty is **very** complicated. Stearns compares it to a spider web of causes woven by injustice, government corruption, drought, contaminated water, unemployment, and bullying. When people get caught in it, they can work hard, but never get ahead—and they just lose hope. And the poverty they are stuck in kills them. Malnutrition alone kills about 25,000 people every day.

-The lack of clean water in our world is a HUGE issue. About a year ago, our teens did something called **72 HOURS**—where they had to walk about 10 miles to get their water. There wasn't much energy to do anything else. That's the reality for about 1.2 billion people in our world. A kid dies every 15 seconds from the parasites and diseases caused by this issue.

- c. Where there are spider webs—there are also...spiders. Spiders are creepy! Insects get caught in the webs they spin—and then they feed on them! People caught in the web of poverty get victimized by those who capitalize on their need. That's exactly where the problem with slavery and prostitution and sweat shops come in. That's why young men get sucked into militias who victimize others—or piracy. When people lose hope—hope that things will **ever** change, or that life even matters—**why not?**

6. Now, here's the good news in all of this bad news. **We...WE** have a chance—more than anyone else—to really make a difference. We, as North Americans, have the wealth and the influence to do that—if we will. Every one of these challenges I've mentioned has a solution. You and I have this chance, at this juncture of history, to make a difference—and in the process, to bring honor to Jesus. For example:

*The preventable child deaths have been cut in half; the percentage of people who are hungry—down; the number of people with access to clean water—up. This is **good!**

- a. Several years ago the rock star, Bono, was **very** critical of the church for ignoring the issues of poverty and AIDS—in essence saying, “How could you, as the people entrusted with the **Good News** of Jesus let this happen on your watch?” I think, I pray, I dream, “God—**help me to be at least ONE person who doesn’t let this tragedy continue while we have the means to help!**” Are you with me?
- b. The statistics of what we as followers of Jesus **could** do are shocking. The overall income of people in North America who go to a church and call themselves followers of Jesus is over \$5.2 **trillion**. That, friends, is a **lot** of money! What percentage of that do you think we would have to give to be considered generous? Compassionate? The OT standard of **minimal** giving for people without the Spirit of Jesus in them was 10%. That’s minimal. Know what we—the wealthiest people in the world—actually give? A little over **2%**! How many of you think that’s **all** we can afford to give? I don’t think it is!
- c. There are several barriers. One, you know about. I got this stack of sale fliers on Thursday. The relentless, pounding message in our ears—from the time we get up till we go to bed—is **spend more! Buy more! Buy bigger! Buy better!**

-And the **lie** of consumerism is, “You’ll be happier! Healthier! You’ll have more friends...” And people almost **never** ask the question, **IS THAT TRUE?** The push to buy things we don’t need is a marketing lie created after WW2 to boost the economy. Jesus said, “Go ahead! Won’t worry. Don’t be afraid you’ll lose your happiness. Give!” But we **are** afraid, aren’t we? We **do** worry? “If I give, will I have enough?”

- d. There’s another issue. We have come to believe the lie that it’s perfectly okay to use what we’ve blessed with all on ourselves. Jesus said we are **managers**, not **owners**.

-Imagine yourself as the parent of two children. Has plenty and has more than they could ever use. But your other child—whom you love just as much is in desperate need because of a number of setbacks not of their making. What would you want the child who had a lot to do? God, as a Father, **is** that parent. And He **specifically** asks us to share what we have—not stack it!

7. Anyone here ever used a **thermos**. Know how they work? It’s quite simple. There’s distance between this inside part that holds what’s hot—and the outside part. The air—the distance between those parts keeps what’s inside either hot or cold. -And that’s our temptation. To try and create distance from ourselves and need. Sometimes it’s because we’re afraid to give. We worry about having enough. Sometimes it’s because we’re afraid that being exposed to need will keep us from the joy of living—and enjoying good things.

-Know what's interesting? Jesus was the most compassionate, loving person who's ever lived—but He lived with joy! He spend time with both rich people and poor people. In fact, in contrast to John the Baptist's austerity, he enjoyed parties, and gave thanks for beauty, joy and the good gifts of life.

-Do you think we talk about these issues in our world—injustice, poverty, refugees, need—to make you feel ashamed of what you have and guilty that you don't do more? That's totally counter-productive—which is why Jesus didn't do it. Love—true tangible, generous, self-giving love is a much more **powerful** motivator.

- a. I recently learned something about how God works in our lives that has had a powerful effect on me. It gets at the heart of our exposure to need. Maybe it will help you. Would you like to know what it is? It's found right in Jesus initial announcement of the Good News—in the beatitudes. Jesus blessed the poor in spirit—the spiritual zeros; he blessed people in anguish—who mourn; he blessed the meek—the people who get shoved around.

-Then He said:

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. (Matthew 5:6 TNIV)

-The word **righteousness** is **not** just about personal piety; it's **way** bigger. It's about **all things being made right**—people, systems, problems—**everything**. Sin could be defined as **NOT The Way It's Supposed To Be**. How many of you would agree that **not the way it's supposed to be** would describe poverty and starvation—this spider web of poverty in our world. Most sane people look at all this—and the bullies who feed on it—and say **that's not right!**

- c. Jesus uses intense words for this longing for right; for shalom. Hunger and thirst. Intense longing—ache—for **things to be the WAY they're supposed to be!** In us. In our families. And **in our world**.

-The **blessing**—the presence and goodness of God doesn't come when we perform and get it all right and solve every problem. What happens then is that people get proud and judgmental and angry.

-That's not Gospel. That's not Good News—then, or now. That's law. We've heard that. No, God engages with us in the struggle. When we struggle with the distance between what we have and what the need is, God doesn't bless us and stay with us when we make the right move. He's with us **in the hunger and thirst for everything to be made right!** Sometimes, right in our failure, right in our mess--God says, "I'm there! I'm on your side!"

-It's interesting. When it comes to generosity, caring, helping—Jesus doesn't give percentages, or more rules—or tell us to get our act together. He tells us, "When you struggle with this ache for all things to be right, God is with you—**right THERE**. He doesn't shame us, kick us around—He **loves** us. When we struggle with bills and paychecks and decisions—worry about the future--how to

want what we **have**—instead of having what we **want** He says, “I’m here! I’m **on your side!**”

-Here’s the deal—when we are hungry and thirsty for the **same things as God**—unbelievable things can happen. We bring our little bag lunch, like one kid did with Jesus; we say, “It’s not much—but it’s **yours!**” And we find something wonderful. Our hearts get changed—God does incredible things—and we find something we **never** expected. Joy!

8. A lot of people in our world have this hunger and thirst for things to be made right. It’s reflected in a **lot** of the music you hear this time of year. Like the song **Grown Up Christmas List. No more lives torn apart; that wars would never start, and time would heal all hearts.** That’s a hunger and thirst for shalom! And that’s **God’s** mission! And ours!

-Is this mission **massive?** Yep. Hopeless? No. Because, see, it’s not **my** mission. It’s God’s—and He’s chosen to use us. Right now, there are about 2 billions people who call themselves followers of Jesus in this world. Think we could solve a few problems if we got together? It’s the snowflake thing I’ve talked about. Individually we, like snowflakes, are small and weak and temporary. But if we stick together—like they did this past week--we can stop traffic!” We **can** make a difference! May it be so!