

Column – Christmas stories that encourage at times like these

There are many great Christmas stories. Of course, the foundational one is found in Luke 2 and begins with the familiar words: “And it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus . . .” If you read no other Christmas story this season, it should be this one.

But there are others which flow from it which are capable of warming our hearts, reinforcing our faith and spurring us to greater Christian service. One such story is found in a book published in 1937 entitled *Purely Personal*. The author John L. Hill supplies us with just such a story. This one comes from the life of Ira D. Sankey.

Sankey is remembered chiefly as a hymnwriter and musical associate to Dwight L. Moody. The two men travelled extensively on both sides of the Atlantic during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century holding evangelistic meetings. I think it would be fair to say they were to the 19<sup>th</sup> century what Billy Graham and his musical associate Cliff Barrows were to the mid

and late 20<sup>th</sup> century -- great crusaders for Christ. Be that as it may, the story Hill relates goes like this:

On Christmas Eve, 1875, Sankey was travelling by steamboat up the Delaware River. The passengers were all on the deck enjoying the starlit evening when someone recognised Sankey and asked him to sing a song. Always gracious and ready to oblige, he stood up, fully intending to sing a Christmas song, but something compelled him to sing a different song. Almost against his will he found coming from his mouth: "Saviour like a shepherd lead us, Much we need thy tender care."

He sang all four verses, and when he had finished, a man from the crowd came forward and told him that he had heard him sing that song on another occasion. It seems that the man had served in the Confederate army during the War Between the States and had come upon Sankey, a Union soldier, while the latter was on picket duty. He had raised his musket to shoot when he caught the words: "We are Thine, do Thou befriend us. Be the Guardian of our way."

He told Sankey that those words so stirred the tender memories of his heart that his arm dropped limp at his side. The Saviour had exercised the care of a shepherd over Sankey who trusted him that night.

This story reminds us of God's providential care, which means that nothing can happen to us outside the circle of His sovereignty. It does not mean that bad things never happen to good people or that God stops every bullet, real or metaphorical, aimed in the direction of His own. Such an assertion would be a monstrous denial of the cross, to say nothing of the experience of many saints down through history including that of Charlie Kirk on Sept. 10 and Ella Cook at Brown University this past week

What it does mean is that the God we serve, the God revealed in and through Jesus of Nazareth, is not an out-of-control God. On the contrary, He is active in creation and at work in the lives of His people.

At times, for reasons known to only to Himself, He DOES stop a speeding bullet, or, in the case of Sankey, keeps that bullet from being fired. But at others, again for reasons known only to Himself, He does not, again as in the case of Kirk and Miss Cook. In both cases, however, God remains sovereign and in control.

Even when evil seems to win, the Maker and Sustainer of the Universe remains in control. Because He is a big God, He is able to override the acts of free moral agents -- even thoroughly wicked ones -- and to weave those acts into His ultimate plan for good. The supreme example of God doing this is the resurrection of Jesus. Men put Jesus on the cross. Their act was real, and they are responsible, but evil did not have the final word. What they meant for evil God meant for good. Through their wicked act came salvation to the world.

At Christmas time and always, we can entrust ourselves and those we love, not to an out-of-control God, but to the One who alone can be trusted to be “the Guardian of our way.”

*O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour us; that whereas, through our sins and wickedness, we are sore let and hindered in running the race that is set before us, thy bountiful grace and mercy may speedily help and deliver us; through the satisfaction of thy Son our Lord, to whom, with thee and the Holy Ghost, be honour and glory, world without end. Amen. (Collect for the Fourth Sunday in Advent, Book of Common Prayer)*

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