

Column – Christmas story

All the world – adults no less than children – love a good story, and there is no story better than the Christmas story recorded in Luke 2, beginning with the familiar words: “And it came to pass in those days, there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus . . .” I hope, if you read no other story this Christmas, it will be this one.

But there are a number of others which flow from this story that are capable of warming our hearts, reinforcing our faith and exciting us to greater Christian service. One such story comes from John L. Hill’s *Purely Personal* published in 1937 and relates a remarkable happening in the life of Ira D. Sankey. This happening took place on Christmas Eve 1875.

Sankey is remembered today chiefly as a hymn-writer and musical associate to Dwight L. Moody. The two men travelled extensively on both sides of the Atlantic during the late 19th century holding evangelistic meetings. I think it would be fair to say they were to the 19th century what Billy Graham and his musical associate Cliff Barrows were to the mid and late 20th century -- great crusaders for Christ. Be that as it may, the story Hill relates goes like this:

On this particular Christmas Eve, Sankey was travelling by steamboat up the Delaware River. The passengers were on the deck enjoying the starlit evening when someone recognized 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, almost against his will, to sing a hymn not directly associated with our Lord’s nativity. From his mouth came the words: “Saviour like a shepherd lead us, much we need thy tender care.”

When he had finished singing all four stanzas, a man from the crowd came forward and told him that he had heard him sing that song on another occasion. He 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 brought back tender memories of his mother singing this hymn. So stirred was his heart that his arm went limp and the musket fell to his side. No shot was fired. 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 experiences of many saints down through history.

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 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. There are examples of both -- God intervening and allowing -- in the Bible. In both cases, however, God remains in control.

Even when evil seems to win, the Maker and Sustainer of the Universe remains in charge. 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 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."

Decorate your tree, put up your lights, wrap your presents, prepare your feast, but don't forget the One who is the reason for the season.

O LORD, raise up, we pray thee, thy power, and come among us, and with great might succour [help] 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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