

“Christmas is a Time to Walk Boldly and Carry a Big Heart”

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

For Advent 4, December 20, 2015.

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 12:2-6

Luke 1:47-55

(by The Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)

No, today’s sermon title is not an attempt to turn Christmas into a political commentary on the American Election next year, or the controversial Republican Party nomination process.

You see, the phrase “speak softly, and carry a big stick” which lies behind this title, originated with the then Republican Presidential candidate, and soon-to-be President, Teddy Roosevelt. In 1900, in correspondence to a colleague, Roosevelt penned the famous line: “Speak softly, and carry a big stick.”

The words have been immortalized in American political lore.

The words came back to me as the world, and especially Canada, honoured the life of Ken Taylor, former Ambassador to Iran, when he died last month. He was an example of a diplomat who was very self-effacing – he spoke and walked softly, but he did not carry a big stick. Instead, he carried a big heart.

That strikes me as the essence of the Advent journey to Christmas, especially this fourth Sunday as we focus on the love of Christ.

Walk softly, speak softly, and carry a big heart. Sorry, Teddy Roosevelt, but I think we need to redefine your famous words.

Before doing so, I checked out the quote itself. It turned out that Roosevelt's words had a meaning much closer to what I want to say today than I imagined. The words "Speak softly and carry a big stick" was a saying not of aggression and power, but just the opposite. In a time when discipline and aggression were the norm, Roosevelt saw the start of any reasonable interaction to be soft, gentle, sensitive. And the role of the big stick? A reminder that assertive power should be kept in abeyance and used only as a last resort.

But Roosevelt never just said "Speak softly and carry a big stick." Politicians like the Bible itself, may find what they say distorted, or only part of their words quoted at a given time. The line Teddy used in correspondence to a colleague was "Speak softly and carry a big stick, and you will go far."

So as I say, I had no reason, or even desire, to lift up echoes of the current political mood in the United States, and the controversy among Republican Nominees for President, but maybe we should. For carrying a big stick is not the front end of our approach to others, but the last resort. You will go far if the first line of approach is to "speak softly."

Parents learn that they must be in control of the family situation, but if yelling, screaming and spanking is the first line of approach to a child of any age, chances are control is lost from the very beginning. Keeping order in a classroom is a challenge, yet if the teacher yells and screams from the very first moment of interacting with students that first day, chances are order will be difficult to keep.

We tend to remember lessons of discipline rendered when they are unique, and not an everyday experience of put-downs or judgment.

Earlier this year a blogger who goes by “Susanne” wrote that: “Everyone has hidden sorrows, fears and wounds. Walk softly and carry a big heart.”

She signs off her blog with these words: “Godspeed and joyful journeying everyone,” words that echo the closing of the book “’Twas the Night Before Christmas: “Merry Christmas to All and to All a Goodnight”

Mary’s song also has words of hope and encouragement, as she professes the favour of God, and the fact that the Mighty One has done great things.

We see Christmas as the birth of Jesus, and the call to follow in his way, but today as the birth is anticipated we can learn much from the commitment, courage, and perseverance of Mary his mother. She sees the goodness of God in this birth where few would offer her affirmation, strength, and encouragement.

Where do we find that spirit today as we seek to “Walk boldly and carry a big heart”? In downtown Dallas there is the Big Heart ministries, which has done much for the needy in that city, and serves dozens of Christmas dinners for the city’s poor even though they received all kinds of criticisms from the city for breaking zoning by-laws. As one person has said: “When you judge, you project your shadows onto others; when you love, you project your light.”

6 year old Poppy Crilly convinced her mom, sister and friends to give out kits to help people live healthy lives who were homeless in Liverpool. Thirty-five kits with food were distributed, and one recipient, Rodney Crowell, remarked “She’s got a big heart and her own mind, a deep love – it’s the strong kind.”

In June you can join the British Heart Foundation in their Big Heart Bike Ride through Tanzania, covering the days June 18-26, 2016. The entry fee is 299 pounds, and the minimum sponsorship target per runner is 3,200 pounds. A big heart, and a big commitment.

The message of Christmas comes close to any one of us when we see opportunities for offering hope and encouragement, peace and love.

Mary’s reference to “rejoicing” in God is the Greek verb that comes from the noun in Greek, *αγγελος*, which is our word “angel.” The Christmas story has roles for angels because the basic message of Christmas is a message of joy.

Whenever we are open to God’s love, receptive to joy, and live with hope, we embody the message of the birth of the Christ Child.

We then are able to “walk boldly and carry a big heart.” That’s what Jesus would have us do.