Title: Uncle Buzz

Date: 12/28/25

Subject: Jesus showed his love and the Father's to us in hopes we'd love him.

Scripture: Luke 2:8 - 20

This Advent we're using stories to communicate the themes of hope, peace, joy and love. This morning's story is about love….

Hi! My name's Ebenezer. Yeah, it's a unique name. You don't hear it a lot. It means "stone of help." The Old Testament prophet Samuel gave the name Ebenezer to a memorial stone he erected. It was intended to help people remember the astounding victory the Lord gave Israel.

You see, the Philistines had the really annoying habit of regularly invading Israel. It seemed like every spring they'd descend from the hills with their chariots, enslave people, force others into hiding, steal crops and create chaos and misery.

The victory from which I got my name was accomplished when Samuel cried out to the Lord for help. The Lord answered by thundering from heaven. It must have been extremely loud and intense as the Philistines were thrown into confusion making it easier for Israel to defeat them. Samuel declared, "Thus far the Lord has helped us." A side note: the Philistines didn't invade again during the prophet's lifetime.

I was told my parents loved that particular story of how the Lord worked. Therefore, they named me Ebenezer. So…I'm named after a rock, a special rock, and not because as some of my friends said - they thought my head looked like a rock or the name Ebenezer fits me because I have rocks in my head.

My story is much more than my story. It really begins with my uncle Jacob. He played a major role in my life. He's the first person I remember anything about. He took me into his home when my parents died. He treated me like his son, his only son, since he and his wife didn't have any children of their own.

Uncle Jacob was a character. Everyone called him Buzz. He got the name because each year when it was time to shear the sheep - did I mention we were shepherds? - we were shepherds. Each year when it was time to shear the sheep, Uncle Jacob thought it'd be a good idea to get a haircut too. Not just a little off the top or the wolfies on the back of the neck, but the whole head, as close to the scalp could be done. Buzzed.

He said it was so the sheep would feel better about losing their wool. No one was sure if he was joking or not. So people called him Buzz.

It would have been more than okay if he kept the haircut idea to himself. But he didn't. He thought it would be a nice way to differentiate his shepherds - if we all got our hair buzzed.

There was grumbling, especially among new employees. There were those who wanted to keep their long locks and promptly quit. Those who continued in his employment got used to the routine that each year we'd all get our hair buzzed. Better to have a job and no hair than no job and hair.

Some people took a low view of shepherds. This included lots of religious leaders who thought we were a bunch of dirty, dishonest thieves. And we weren't considered reliable witnesses in a court of law. The problem was there were plenty of shepherds who fit the stereotypes as they were brutish thugs who gave the rest of us a bad name.

Uncle Buzz said we shouldn't pay attention to what the haters said. They'd just go on hating, but should know better. Being a shepherd was an honorable thing. Father Abraham was a shepherd. His son Isaac was a shepherd. His son Jacob, Buzz's namesake, was a shepherd. Moses was a shepherd. And King David had been a shepherd. Why, David even portrayed the Lord as a shepherd! "If being a shepherd was good enough for them and the Lord, it's good enough for me." That's what he said. That's what he always said.

Buzz loved to tell stories from Scripture. Maybe because some folks treated us shepherds as outcasts, he was drawn to stories about loners, those who were considered weak, the underdogs. He told about Moses standing up to the greatest emperor in the world, Gideon and his small army facing overwhelming odds, Elijah all alone against the crazed horde who worshipped the false god Baal, the hesitant prophet Jonah who sparked a revival.

One of his favorite stories was about David, whom he called the skinny-armed sheepherder. When he told how the Lord used him to slay Goliath, he'd energetically tell it and then we acted it out.

It was great fun when I got to be David and he was Goliath. He'd pretend to be the giant. He'd shout, "Am I a dog that you come at me with sticks?"

I'd respond, "You come at me with sword and spear, but I come against you in the name of the Lord Almighty!" Then I'd launch a pretend stone from my sling and he'd dramatically fall over and play dead.

Even though he made learning the story entertaining and exciting, he'd remind me and anyone who was listening: "It's not by sword or spear that the Lord saves; for the battle is the Lord's." Sometimes he put it in more homespun terms: "It isn't the size of the dog in the fight but the size of the God in the fighter."

You thought I was going to say, "the size of the fight in the dog," didn't you?

He always talked about how if we trust in God, he would help us, even though it might be hard to see what he was doing at times. He'd bring up the words from a prophet: "'Not by might nor by power, but by my Spirit,' says the Lord Almighty…Who dares despise the day of small things?" (Zechariah 4:6, 10). Then he'd invariably say "One alone is enough with God. Hang in there."

He felt that if God could use a single person or a small group, he could use a tiny, little town like Bethlehem. My uncle thought our village would indeed be special one day. He was glad he lived in the little obscure spot on the backside of nowhere where he expected great things to happen at any moment. His belief was based on his favorite passage from Scripture - the words of the prophet Micah: "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times... He will stand and shepherd his flock in the

strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God…his greatness will reach the ends of the earth" (Micah 5:2, 4).

All that was great, even mind boggling - when I was younger. But it started to ring hollow as I grew older, when I learned how many, many years earlier the prophet had written about Bethlehem. It was going on 600 years. I don't know about the way you do math, but that was an exceptionally long time to me.

The words were so old and besides that, there hadn't been any prophet of the Lord for 400 years. So why would anyone expect anything to happen anytime soon? Did God still care, if he had ever cared? Does he love people even though it seems like he's not listening or doing anything?

If I'd heard the "promise" once, I heard it a thousand times and so had everyone else. Uncle Buzz was obsessed with it. It seemed like he was the only one, but he was okay with that. Buzz believed. He really believed.

There was no use arguing with him as that would make him say it again all the louder and more passionately. I had contradicted him one too many times. He sat me down, looked me straight in the eye, and gave me a lecture worthy of the best rabbinical school. He droned on and on about prophecies in general, the particular prophecy concerning Bethlehem, God's faithfulness and the importance of believing.

I learned my lesson the hard way that the best way to give my ears a rest was just smile and nod and let him say his piece. I didn't want to go through that again. I just kept my feelings and opinions to myself.

However, I took kind of a perverse comfort that plenty of other people had the same evaluation of his yammering, that Uncle Buzz was a little off. I tried to stay behind the scenes when these opinions came up in my presence. I just remained quiet and inwardly smiled that I wasn't the only one who thought that way. I didn't concede that I agreed with them, at least not right away, because he was family, and you watch out for family. But if people tried lumping me in the same boat with him, I'd straighten them out faster than a racing camel.

Frankly, I didn't notice the negative reactions from people when I was younger. But the older I got the more aware I became. The critics were hard to listen to at first. And when I got "more mature" and hardened to his beliefs, I didn't care. Uncle Buzz kept right on believing though people were rough on him, no matter how crazy they thought he was for taking the "prophecy" seriously.

Nothing happened in Bethlehem and nothing ever would happen in the teensy, tiny, itsy-bitsy little town. I was a shepherd. I would always be a shepherd. What was worse was that there was no choice in the matter. What about my interests and talents? Shouldn't I be able to explore them?

There were other things I dreamed of doing - traveling the world of which I'd heard fanciful tales. I could sail the seas and go off to distant Rome. I attribute that yearning to my second name – Jonah – not that I wanted to be like him and get a personal tour of the insides of a giant fish.

Maybe I could go down to Egypt and its splendors. Or to exotic and mysterious Babylon. I could see the sights, be part of it all, find adventure. And invariably wherever I traveled, when people noticed I wasn't a local, they would ask where I was from, I'd answer "Where am I from? Bethlehem in Judea."

"Never heard of it. How big is it?"

And when I'd tell them, they'd laugh and mock its size. At least… that's what I'd imagined they'd do.

I didn't have to worry about those things happening as I was never ever getting out of Bethlehem. Nope. Never gonna leave podunkville. Bethlehem Schmethlehem.

Why didn't I leave? Why didn't I join a caravan that came through the village? Why not sneak off in the dark of the night while everyone else was sleeping? Those were the questions I asked myself many times. Guess I felt obligated to Uncle Buzz because he had raised me.

Why am I telling you all this? I'm getting to that.

The years slowly passed . . . and so did Uncle Buzz, I mean Uncle Jacob. As I said, Uncle Jacob didn't have any children. When he died, I inherited the family business. He had always been kind and generous to me, even during my rebellious times.

I had become the chief shepherd. We continued raising sheep for the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem. One day led to another, to weeks, to months, to years. Before I realized it, Uncle Jacob had been gone for 30 years. I was amazed at how quickly I'd become the old coot.

I had also inherited…no…that's not the right word…but what Uncle Jacob had believed and tried to pass down to me, had become truly mine as well. It took a while. I couldn't, as hard as I tried, get out of my head what Jacob had said, believed and how he lived based on God's promises.

The Lord had said he would take the people out of Egypt and bring them into the promised land, and he did. He said he'd defeat the impenetrable city of Jericho. He brought down the walls. He helped David with his giant problem. He protected Daniel in the lions' den by shutting the mouths of the lions. He promised Jeremiah the Israelites would return from Babylonian captivity and they did. God repeatedly showed himself as "The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin" (Exodus 34:6, 7).

I relied on God being who he said he was and that he would fulfill all his promises. The Lord had said that though a mother might forget her baby and have no compassion for it, he wouldn't forget his people (Isaiah 49:15). I chose to "Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever" (Ps 107:1).

Then, before I knew it, I was nearing my 80th birthday. I was still sort of spry for my age, most of the time, and decided to celebrate by going out to the fields to be with the shepherds. I occasionally would do such a thing. A man can stand being cooped up in a house for only so long. Being in the fields, with the sheep and shepherds made it feel like the good, old days and I was one of the guys again. And it was a great way to keep up on the local gossip, er, I mean, the news.

The shepherds referred to me as "pops." "How's it going pops?" "Pops, nice to see you out here."

Sometimes they would try to draw me into political discussions. "Pops, what do you think of Rome ruling over us? And how about that King Herod, pops?" I didn't dabble too much in those areas.

There was another thing the younger shepherds asked. What am I saying? They were all younger. They'd ask, "Pops do you really believe that something special is going to happen right here in Bethlehem?"

My eyes would get a little misty as I thought of Uncle Jacob. I'd momentarily look off into the distance at the town and the stars that shone above it. . . if they were out. I'd clear my throat, look them in the eyes, and launch into those precious words the Lord spoke through the prophet Micah: "But you Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

I was hoping and trusting and counting on the words, ones my uncle often quoted, coming true. I was hoping the One spoken of would come during my lifetime. It would be so exciting to be alive when it happened. God had been so good to me, even after I'd turned away from him. But like a good shepherd looking for his lost sheep, he searched for me, found me and welcomed back into his fold. And I believed he would provide One who would bring salvation to all who place their trust in him. I believed the Lord was going to do something in Bethlehem. He said he would.

Someday.

I always enjoyed the vantage point from the hills overlooking Bethlehem. This particular night the view was breath-taking. The sleepy little town looked so peaceful with the wisps of smoke from cooking fires curling their way to heaven. And since there were no clouds, the nighttime sky was spectacular as the stars twinkled like jewels set by a master designer.

An occasional laugh rose from the village. From another section came a shriek of pain. Probably from some woman giving birth to a child. After a while, you recognize those kinds of things. I hoped and prayed the delivery wouldn't be too painful, safe and the child would bring the parents immense amounts of joy, hope, peace and especially love.

Even though the teensy, tiny, itsy-bitsy town – my teensy, tiny itsy-bitsy town – was more crowded than normal because of the Roman census, there really wasn't much movement.

There never was. And that's the way I liked it. Just another silent night . . . well, almost. Another piercing cry from a birthing pain.

The shepherds, my boys, always tried to make things easy for me or at least easier. They'd use some of their blankets and arrange a nice place for me near the fire. I forgot how chilly it could get at night, even during the nicest weather. Keeping those old bones warm was a priority because of my rheumatism and bad circulation.

I have to admit I was questioning the wisdom of my decision. Perhaps it might not have been a good idea to try to stay the night. They don't make fires the way they used to. I edged closer to the fire and finally was able to doze off.

The next thing I was vaguely aware of was the shepherds making a ton of racket as they tried to get me to wake up. It was hard to make out what they were saying as they were talking excitedly over one another. It sounded like muffled gibberish, but I caught snippets.

"Pops. Pops. Wake. Should have seen. Angel. Lots of angels. Today. Town of David. Savior. Christ. Baby. Manger. C'mon. Let's go."

It seemed like a dream, and I've had plenty of wild ones, believe me. I couldn't get up and didn't want to. I shooshed my boys away, told them to go and tell me later. I drifted off to sleep and then in and out of sleep.

When they came back, they again were talking over one another. Again, I could only catch some of what they said. "We saw. Wonderful. Baby. Christ the Lord. Ran back. Told everyone. Pops. You missed. It happened. The promise is fulfilled."

I tried to wake up but didn't have the strength…or desire. The warmth felt so good, like being surrounded by pure love. It seemed like it was coming from the inside. I just wanted to bask in it.

And that's the last thing I remember before I woke up…and found myself here in heaven in the presence of the Lord.

What about you? What's your story? What happened to you before you made it to heaven?

& & & & &

Heaven will provide plenty of time for people to share their stories of how they made it to heaven, their trust in God and their walk with him. Who knows? We may run into a shepherd named Ebenezer who was alive the night Christ was born. His story may even have transpired the way I depicted it.

While we don't know the backgrounds and personal information of the shepherds who heard from the angels that the Savior had been born, we do know they went into the teensy, tinsy, itsy-bitsy little town to see for themselves. We don't know how long they stayed at the manger. We don't know the conversation they had with Joseph and Mary. We do know they left the manger and told anyone and everyone they saw about what had happened: "Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born. He is Christ the Lord."

Your greatest need, my greatest need, the world's greatest need has always been and will always be to experience the love of God. We're to share the love we've received from God with those who've placed their personal trust and confidence in Jesus to pay the penalty for the moral crimes they've committed against God. We're also to share God's love with those who haven't done so. We're to help them know how they can be rightly related to God, so all God's promises of love can be theirs.

Love was born in the manger of Bethlehem that night. Love came down from heaven, came as the breath of heaven, as Emmanuel. Through him God is with us now. He'll be with us next year. He'll be with us forever. He's the one who holds us together.

Christian author and thinker C.S. Lewis helps us understand God's motivation: "God loves us NOT because we're lovable, but because he is love. Not because he needs to receive, but because he delights to give."

How have and will you, how have and will I, respond to God's love? Will we give it a passing acknowledgement, like we do the cars that zip by us on Interstate 41? Will we allow it into our lives based on our requirements and our time frame…maybe on a trial basis?

Or will we long for it, welcome it, receive it, embrace it and unreservedly open ourselves up to it?