

THE RESCUE MISSION

Scriptures: Galatians 4:1-7; Luke 1:26-35

Recently I watched a movie on video that I first saw several years ago called *Executive Decision*. It is an action adventure movie about a terrorist group that hijacks a Boeing 747 Jumbo Jet and flies it to Washington, D. C., where they plan to explode a bomb filled with deadly nerve gas that will wipe out our nation's capital. Considering that the movie was made in 1996, it is eerily prophetic.

This movie never won any awards, nor would I say did it deserve any. It is a classic blow 'em up, shoot 'em up, disarm the bomb at the last second action adventure. But as I thought about it, I realized that this movie is a perfect illustration of Christmas.

Stay with me on this. The plane is like God's creation. God's creation is good. It was launched by God to be a good thing, a fun trip for Adam and Eve and their descendants towards a glorious destination. But it was hijacked along the way. Sin came into the world, because some of the passengers decided to take control of the plane and fly it to their own destination instead of the destination that God intended. So now the plane is headed for destruction, not only destruction of the passengers but destruction of God's whole creation.

So what is God going to do about this? In the movie the U. S. military faces a quandary. There seems to be no way to stop the plane without shooting it down over the Atlantic Ocean, killing the 400 passengers on board. They try negotiating with the terrorists but they will not be dissuaded. Then the military sends fighter jets to divert the plane to a safe landing site, but the terrorists ignore them and continue on their course of destruction.

That, in a way, is like the law and the prophets in the Bible. God sends the Ten Commandments as a way of negotiating with us, trying to help us understand that if we continue in sin and rebellion, if we continue to insist on our own way instead of God's, we will destroy ourselves and everything with us. Then God sends the prophets, like fighter jets, to turn us around and direct us to a safe landing, but we still don't listen.

One of the reasons we don't listen is that like the passengers on the plane we are trapped. At the beginning of Galatians 4 the apostle Paul says, "My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves." This statement does not make much sense unless you have read the previous chapter, but here is the idea: We were created to be heirs of God's promises. Or to put it another way, we were intended to be passengers on a flight to a wonderful new land that we could enjoy for ever. But when we allowed the terrorists to take over the plane, when we allowed sin to have its way in our lives, we became captives, and we lost the ability to turn the plane around by ourselves. As Paul says in verse 3, "So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world"—which is one of Paul's terms for the power of sin. We have become slaves—captives—on our own airplane.

Back to the movie. The passengers are trapped on an airplane headed for destruction, and the only way to stop it is by shooting it down, destroying the passengers in the process.

But then someone comes up with a wild idea. They send an anti-terrorist assault team to board the plane in mid-air. They fly the team out to the plane in a Stealth bomber. The Stealth bomber approached the Jumbo Jet from behind and underneath where it cannot be seen from the cockpit or the windows. Then in mid-air they attached a docking collar to a hatch underneath the Jumbo Jet, and the assault team climbs through the docking collar into the cargo hold of the jet without the terrorists knowing it.

Now here is where we get to Christmas. None of the passengers inside the plane have the power to save themselves. They do not have the weapons to overcome the terrorists or the skill to diffuse the bomb. They can be saved only by someone more powerful who comes into the plane from the outside. Someone more powerful than they must enter their world, enter their captivity, so to speak, and liberate them from the inside.

That is what we call the incarnation. Galatians 4:4-5: “But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children.” This sentence is confusing because Paul is mixing two metaphors here: redemption and adoption. Redemption is what you do to set free a slave. Redemption is when you buy a slave from a master in order to set the slave free. Adoption takes this a step further and describes how a freed slave becomes an actual son or daughter of the householder.

But I am going to replace both metaphors with a third metaphor. Christmas is when Jesus boarded our plane. Christmas is when Jesus entered our world of captivity to sin and death. All the efforts to change us from the outside did not work. When God tried to reason with us through the commandments or sent fighter jets to divert us through the prophets—all of that failed to turn the plane around. We could not be saved from the outside; we had to be saved from the inside. Jesus had to enter our world in order to defeat the power of sin, to diffuse the bomb ticking inside of us, and to turn the plane around and take us where we were meant to go.

The movie gets pretty exciting at this point. The assault team enters the aircraft, but then they have to find the terrorists and the bomb without revealing their presence until the right moment. I will not take time to explain how they do that, but finally they defeat the terrorists and diffuse the bomb. The plane is set free.

Do you see where this is going? Christmas is God’s rescue mission. At Christmas God sent Jesus into our world to liberate us from the power of sin that held us captive to a path of destruction. He did that through his life, death, and resurrection. In coming weeks in our church services, we will explain a little better how that works. During the winter and spring we will study the gospel of Matthew in our church services, where we will witness the plot of how God uses Jesus to take over the plane. But the good news of Christmas is that Jesus succeeded. Jesus entered our world, and through his life, death, and resurrection he set us free from the sin in our lives and world that was hurtling us toward death.

Our Christmas carol for this week, “Hark, the Herald Angels Sing,” describes this in the third verse: “Hail the heaven-born Prince of Peace! Hail the sun of righteousness! Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings. Mild he lays his glory by, born that we no more

may die, born to raise us from the earth, born to give us second birth. Hark, the herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King!'"

But there is one last crisis in the movie. Once the plane is freed from the terrorists, someone has to fly it. If the passengers take over the controls themselves, they are not skilled enough. They will end up destroying themselves anyway. Once the plane is liberated, the controls must be handed to the rescuers, or the rescue will fail.

That, friends, is also the story of Christmas. We will not get where God wants us to be, unless we give him the controls. Jesus must become not only our Savior but our Lord. Jesus must become for us not only a cute baby born on Christmas, but the risen Lord whom we follow and serve every day, every week, every year of our lives.

I saw a bumper sticker once that said, "God is my co-pilot." Later on the refrigerator of our church I saw a kitchen magnet that said, "If God is your co-pilot, you need to trade seats."

That, too, is the message of Christmas. At Christmas God has boarded your plane to rescue you from destruction. But it will not work if he sits in the co-pilot seat while you continue to steer the plane toward your own self-centered destination. You must let him have the pilot seat. You must let him fly the plane. If you don't, you will not only mess up your own life but also the lives of other people you care about. If you do, you will discover that he can take you to better places than you even thought of going.

- Ken Onstot
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