

SERMON
The Nativity of Our Lord

December 24, 2004

7:00 & 11:00

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

Brothers and sisters in Christ, grace to you and peace from God the Father, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus, who is the Christ. Amen.

During the past four weeks, we have been on a journey through the season of Advent. Advent is a time of waiting and expectation. It is a time of hope. Each week we sang together an ancient Celtic prayer;

In the mighty name of God,
In the saving name of Jesus,
In the strong name of the Spirit,
We come,
We cry,
We watch,
We wait,
We long for you.

But now the waiting is over. Tonight we celebrate the birth of our Lord. Perhaps for some of you it is a time to finally relax. No doubt the last few weeks have been hectic and stressful to say the least.

So in the quietness of this evening we can take a moment to catch our breath, to perhaps forget all of our personal troubles, and to think about what is really important to God and to us.

But sometimes it is hard to determine what things are “really important.” There are so many voices crying out for our attention – so many differing philosophies saying; “This is what is really important.”

We go to work, and the corporate world says that the only thing that counts is profitability – the bottom line. “Make the sale, get the signature on the dotted line, close the deal, cut costs, climb the ladder, get the promotion, make more money, get to the top no matter what it takes.” After all, that’s what’s really important.

Then we come home to our spouse and/or children. We hear that family ties are really important. Maybe we shouldn’t work so hard or travel so much. Maybe we should spend more time at home and do more things with the family.

Then we read the newspaper or a magazine that tells us how important our health is as we eat a couple of pieces of cold pizza and sip on a beer while sitting in our recliner. More and more people are dying in their prime of life due to stress and bad eating habits. It was just reported that Christmas Day and New Years Day are the top two days for dying from a heart attack

After all, you can't do anything without your health, we hear. All the money in the world is useless if you lose your health. Maybe what's really important is that we start working out and eating more fruits and vegetables. But of course, that takes even more of our time.

Then along comes Christmas – a time of year where the rate of depression and suicides skyrocket. A time of year when the things we do and the things we buy put even more stress on our time and our pocketbooks. It makes things more confusing than ever.

On one side are Santa Clause and reindeer and red noses and bags of toys and chimneys and Christmas trees and excited children.

We start asking our children and grandchildren; “What do you want for Christmas?” And the list gets longer and longer, and their little eyes want more and more.

Take Bill and Nancy for instance. They chase around for weeks, and finally they have collected everything on their list. They finally stop to have a quiet moment. Michael's new bike is leaning next to the wall. Sara's dollhouse is set up in the corner. But something's not right.

Gradually it dawns on them. It doesn't look like enough. They have spent an incredible amount of time, not to mention the money. They bought everything the kids had on their lists and then some. But it just doesn't fit their image of what a wonderful Christmas should look like.

Let me tell you about Shelly. She and her husband both work full-time. She insists on preparing the family Christmas dinner for twenty-five people by her self. She spends days baking, cleaning, and shopping.

Then she's up at 3:00 A.M. on Christmas Eve morning to put the turkey in the oven and finish the preparations. By 3:00 P.M., she's in tears, because she's exhausted.

Then on the other side comes Christmas Eve when we all go to worship. We hear about a baby in a manger, a quiet night in a stable, shepherds tending their flocks. We hear about a God who loves – about promises that are kept – about joy and peace.

So the question is; was it worth the waiting, the preparation, and the anticipation? Or, have you ever wondered at what point in life our expectations change from; “I can't wait for Christmas to come” to “I can't wait for Christmas to be over.”

In our Gospel story this evening, Joseph and Mary had also been going through a period of waiting, preparation and anticipation. They were expecting the birth of a child.

They had traveled to Bethlehem to take part in the census. But when they arrived, there was no place for them to stay.

Zig Ziglar tells about his brother who was traveling. He came to a hotel and asked for a room for the night. The manager told him that they were fully booked and there were no rooms available.

Ziglar's brother said; “Now be honest with me. If the President of the United States walked through the door just now and requested a room, would you have a place for him to stay?”

The manager replied; “Well, if the President needed a room, we'd find one for him.” Ziglar's brother said; “That's great. I know for a fact that he's not coming, so I'll take his room.”

It helps in our world to have clout – to have power. If you have money, power, or fame, you can get just about anything you want. Now, you would think that if God were going to come into the world, he would have been born to a family with power, influence, and respect.

But instead, God comes to us among the poor and the lowly. Born of a virgin – son of a simple carpenter. You see, the message of Christmas is that God intrudes upon the weak and the vulnerable part of us, and this is precisely the message that we so often miss.

God does not come to that part of us that swaggers through life, confident in our self-sufficiency. God leaves his treasure in the broken fragmented places of our life.

God comes to us in those rare moments when we are able to transcend our own selfishness long enough to really care about another human being.

On the wall of the museum at the concentration camp at Dachau, Germany is a large and moving photograph of a mother and her little girl standing in a line leading to a gas chamber. The child, who is walking in front of her mother, does not know where she is going. The mother, who walks behind, does know, but is helpless to stop the tragedy.

In her helplessness she performs the only act of love left to her. She places her hands over the child's eyes so she will at least not see the horror to come.

When people come into the museum they do not whisk by this photo hurriedly. They pause. They almost feel the pain. And deep inside I think that they are all saying: "O God, don't let that be all that there is."

These are the prayers that touch the very heart of God. For it is in just such situations of hopelessness and helplessness that God's almighty power is born. It is there that God leaves his treasure – in Mary and in all of us, as Christ is born anew within.

Wally was a 7th grade student who was bigger than any of the other students in his Sunday school class. His mother had been an alcoholic when he was born. And as a result, Wally just didn't have all the mental capabilities that the rest of his classmates had. But somehow he managed to get by.

Christmas time came, and his class decided to put on a Christmas pageant. Since he was the biggest, Wally was selected to be the innkeeper.

After all, the innkeeper is kind of a villain in the Christmas drama. So they coached Wally to be just as mean as he could possibly be.

Well, the night came for the Christmas play. Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, went to the Inn and knocked on the door. Wally opened the door and said; "What do you want?" just as mean and gruff as he could be.

Joseph said, "We need a room. We need a place to stay tonight." "Well, you'll have to stay someplace else," said Wally, "because there's no room here. There's no room in the Inn."

Joseph said, "But my wife's expecting a baby any time now. It's cold outside tonight. Isn't there someplace where we can stay where she can deliver her child?" "No," said Wally, "there's no room here."

Then suddenly there was a silence on the stage. It was one of those embarrassing moments when you know that someone has forgotten the lines. From behind the curtain you could hear the prompter saying; "Begone! Begone!" Wally was supposed to speak, but for some reason he had choked up and forgotten to say "Begone."

Finally, after he had been coached for several long seconds, Wally managed to say, "Begone." Mary and Joseph sadly turned to leave. But just as they did, Wally said, "Wait a minute. Wait a minute. You can have my room."

The director of the play was ready to pull out her hair because she knew that the whole Christmas pageant had been ruined.

But had it? Perhaps Wally, better than anybody else, communicated the real spirit of Christmas. “You can have my room.” For Wally gave of himself for the sake of others. Wally could not turn his back on Joseph and Mary and the unborn child.

And that is the image we have of God. God will not turn his back on us and send us away. Instead God says; “You can have my only son. He will be a gift to you so that you might know what it means to experience unconditional love.”

A housewife was washing dishes one evening when she looked at one particular plate and asked; “How many times have I washed this plate?” Then she set down the plate, took off her apron, packed a few of her belongings, and left.

That night she called home to tell her husband that she was all right, but that she just could not come home again. Sometimes, when she would call home to check on the children, her husband would tell her how much he loved her and he would ask her to come home. But each time she refused.

The husband then hired a private detective to search for her. The detective learned that she was living in a second-class hotel in a distant city. The husband took a bus to find her.

When he knocked on the door of her room, his hands trembled because he did not know the kind of reception he would receive. His wife opened the door, stood for a moment in shocked silence, then fell into his arms.

Later, at home, he asked her, “When you would call on the phone, I would tell you how much I love you. Why didn’t you come home?” She replied; “Before, your love was just words. Now I know how much you love me because you came to me.”

Isn’t that what Christmas is all about? We now know how much God loves us because he came to us. He became one of us – Emmanuel, “God with us”. And if we are honest with ourselves, that is what is most important.

For without that, life becomes meaningless and empty. After all, without a creator who loves us, what is the purpose of life? Where do we find hope in a world filled with despair?

So tonight our God comes to us. He comes to share our pain and ease it with his presence. He comes to us in the midst of our problems and gives us the strength to deal with them.

He comes to help us endure our illnesses and to know healing and wholeness in him. He comes to comfort our grieving in the losses in life we suffer. He comes to give us hope to go on when we think we cannot.

But most of all, he comes to overcome death and to give us new life. For we have come, we have cried, we have watched, we have waited, we have longed for you O Lord. May your presence be a source of faith and life for us this night and forevermore. Amen.

May the peace that passes all understanding be with you now and for life everlasting. Amen.

CHILDREN’S MESSAGE

Tonight is very special, isn’t it? It’s Christmas Eve, the night of Jesus’ birth! Can you imagine being at the manger that night long ago when Jesus was born? Mary and Joseph would be there, watching their newborn son all wrapped up – so tiny and so amazing. God had sent his Son to the world to save all people.

There were other creatures there at the manger that night too besides humans. What other animals do you suppose saw the baby Jesus? Cows, sheep, donkeys, dogs

How about ants? Do you think that there were any ants there?

There are ants all over the world, aren't there? I'm sure that there were some ants near the stable where Jesus was born even if they couldn't see them. Because ants are very tiny.

Let's say that you really loved ants. Let's say that there was a bunch of ants living next to your house. You were careful not to step on those ants, and you would even leave food out for them. Let's say that you loved each individual ant and you wished that they could know how much you loved them.

How in the world could you talk to an ant to tell them how much you loved them?

How about if you got down on your tummy and tried to look a teeny ant in the eye, could you make it understand?

The only way that you are going to get those ants to understand is to become an ant yourself. Can you imagine being an ant?

It would be a dangerous experiment. You could get squashed. Maybe you would go through all that trouble to become an ant and they wouldn't even listen to you. The ants that you love might say "get out of here, we don't want you around!" Other ants might trust you and love you back.

So how do you think this story helps us to understand Jesus?

God loved us so much and wanted to tell us. So he became a human being just like us. That human being was Jesus. And Jesus told us how very much God loves us. Some people don't trust God. They say; "get out of here God, we don't want you around!" But other people like us trust that God loves us. And that's what we celebrate tonight.

Merry Christmas.

Let us pray.... Dear Lord, thank you for sending your son, Jesus, to our earth to show us how much you love us. Amen.