

## ***Born to Serve***

Luke 2:1-10

December 24, 2006

10:00 p.m.

### **I.**

Tonight is the last church service before Christmas Day arrives. All over the world, as midnight approaches, people are being drawn into places of worship.

And we all have our own reasons for coming to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. Some of us are thankful and want to praise God for the blessings we have received. Others of us could have gone through great difficulties in the past year, and come seeking a source of strength and support.

And perhaps some of us are here because we just need to hear the story one more time. We want to believe that all this religion business is not just something that people made up centuries ago, and there really is more to Christmas than we see in the malls. We want to be told again about God and his only Son, and the love he extends to us and the salvation he offers.

And it is a wonderful story, isn't it? All of the images are peaceful, and uplifting, and inspiring. We see them on Christmas cards, in magazines, and in Christmas decorations in our homes. There are images of baby Jesus in the manger, of shepherds in the fields watching their flocks, and of angels in the starlit skies.

Many of us don't care for the way Christmas has been commercialized. We think there is something wrong when strong retail sales mean more than strong relationships with God. We think about the good old days, and we have fond memories of an old fashioned Christmas.

We think about peace and comfort. We remember a fire in the fireplace, lots of candles, Christmas carols, cookies in the oven, Grandpa in the big chair with his pipe. We remember scenes that might have been drawn by Norman Rockwell, or that might appear in a Currier and Ives print.

### **II.**

Those are all good ways to think about Christmas. But there also is more to it. Most of us here are reasonably comfortable and well-off. And we are thankful for that. God wants us to be happy and prosperous, and he wants us to have the desires of our hearts.

But God also says "there also is something more." He says "as you go about your lives in your modern world, I also want you to listen to me." God certainly wants us to be blessed by what happened in the manger in Bethlehem, but he also wants us to understand why it happened the way it did, and what it means

Sometimes it's easy to look at a situation and get one message but miss another message that also is there. Here's an example that makes the point.

I was born in Dayton, Ohio, which was the home of Wilbur and Orville Wright. As you recall, the Wright Brothers were the first people to fly an airplane. And as you might not know, they also were tinkerers, mechanics, and inventors of several things, and already were pretty well known around Dayton even before their flight.

Well, on December 17, 1903 Wilbur and Orville, on their fifth attempt, got their plane in the air for twelve seconds of controlled flight. When they finished Wilbur rushed to the telegraph

office and sent a message to the local newspaper. The message said "we have flown our plane for the first powered flight in history, and will be home for Christmas."

Of course, Wilbur and Orville expected a big front page story about what they had accomplished. They anticipated a headline that said "Wright Brothers Fly!" or something like that. Well, when the paper came out the next day there was no front page story at all. Instead, there was a little article on page fourteen and the headline said "Wright Brothers Home for Christmas."

The newspaper had missed the biggest story of the year. Sometimes I wonder if we also can overlook some important things when we hear the story of Jesus' birth so long ago.

### III.

Let's go back and look at the story again. What do we see? Obviously, a key part was the angel's pronouncement, which was "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." We all remember that part. Jesus Christ as the savior of humanity is the foundation of the Christian faith.

But is there something else, something more? I believe there is. Look at the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth.

He was born in a stall and slept in a manger. It happened in a small province far from the seat of world power at the time. The only people there were Mary and Joseph, a young couple no one had ever heard of, and who had not even gotten married yet. No advance preparations had been made, and the first visitors were lowly shepherds, who were at the bottom of the pecking order in just about every way.

By coming into the world in this way, God through his Son identified with the oppressed and the powerless, the poor and the needy, those who have little and exist on the margins of life.

Think for a minute, if Jesus would be born today, how would it happen? Now, I ask you to indulge me here because it is entirely hypothetical. Jesus was born two thousand years ago and when he comes again it will be as a man, not a baby. But let's just ask the question anyway, and see where it leads.

First, where would the manger be? Well, it might not be in the delivery room of a modern hospital, or in an emergency room, or even at home. Instead it might be in a shelter, or a fire station, or perhaps a community center. If you are a fan of the Allman Brothers Band and remember their 1973 hit record, *Ramblin' Man*, you might say that it could be in the back of a Greyhound bus rollin' down highway 41.

And to whom would the angel Gabriel appear today? Who would be Mary in 2006? Would it be any of us, or our daughters or granddaughters? Well, perhaps. There are truly faithful people in this congregation. And a 2006 version of Mary would be a person of strong faith.

But if we follow the biblical model, it probably would be a poor young woman, struggling to make ends meet. It probably would be someone from a background more humble than most of us or our children have known. It probably would be someone whose faith is greater than her hope.

And where would this modern day Jesus be born? In America? In the most powerful nation in the world? Well, perhaps. We live in a country with a strong Christian heritage.

But again, if we follow the biblical model, it probably would be somewhere else. It could be in Latin America, or Asia, or Africa, or in the poverty of Central Europe.

What would all that tell us about the birth of our hypothetical modern day Jesus? Where do we think Jesus would carry out his ministry as a young man? Where would we find him? I think it would in the same place it was in actual history. It would be with the poor and the needy, and those just get by. It would be with the sick and the elderly, and those the world has forgotten.

#### **IV.**

And so, we come to church tonight to celebrate the birth of our Savior, and it is good that we do that. God wants us to do that; he wants us to come and hear the words of Luke's Gospel.

And we come to church tonight to sit in this sanctuary and renew our own faith. We come to hear the familiar music, and see the beautiful decorations, and to receive communion. Those are all good things, and are pleasing to God.

But we also come to church to understand once again what it means to be a Christian. The church is not only a place where we come together, it also is a place from where we are sent out into the world to do the work that God has given us to do.

A few moments ago I talked about the hypothetical birth of Jesus in today's world just to help make a point. But, this was all hypothetical. Jesus already lived, died, rose again, ascended into heaven, and left the Holy Spirit behind. And although he speaks to us through the Spirit, we will not see him until he comes again.

And in the meantime it is up to us. We now are his hands, and his feet, and his heart. We must do what he would do if he were here. As believers we are the beneficiaries of his death, and as faithful Christians we must care for the people about whom he cared during his life.

#### **V.**

I visited a church a few years ago that took seriously its obligation to care for those who needed help. And after my meeting as I drove out of the parking lot I saw a big sign. It said, "You are now entering the mission field." We don't have a sign like that outside of St. Thomas, but the essential truth of that statement applies to us all.

When we think of our Lord Jesus Christ we often think of salvation. In doing that we remember Jesus' death and what it means for us in the next world and eternity. Tonight, however, we celebrate his birth and his life, and that requires us to think about this world and the here and now.

In one case we think about ourselves, and praise Jesus for the way he left the world and enabled us to be with him forever. In the other case we think about others, and offer praise for the way he came into the world and called us to follow him.

So, as we go home tonight and finish our Christmas preparations, and as we get up tomorrow morning and share wonderful moments with our families and friends, let us not forget the other people in this Gospel story. How can we be shepherds? What could we do so that the angels sing their songs to us?

Jesus died to save us all, but he lived to help the poor and needy. As we celebrate his birth we remember that it all began in a manger. From that lowly beginning the world was changed, and if we are to honor him then we called to carry on the work now that he began then. *Amen.*