

Extending The Gift To Others

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2007

I.

Many of you might remember the movie, *Its a Wonderful Life*, which was made in 1946 by Frank Capra, and is on television a lot during the Christmas season. And even though it's an old movie, the theme is timeless. It applies to us today just as much as to our parents and grandparents years ago.

The movie starred Jimmy Stewart as George Bailey, who was stuck in a small town and thought he never would realize his dreams. He was very depressed about his life. So God sent a guardian angel to show him what his home town would have been like if he not had been born. It was like some of these alternative history novels in the bookstores.

And through the angel's eyes George Bailey saw, in example after example, how his life had made a difference to so many other people. He saw how he had enriched their lives, and how much he really meant to others.

What if someone made a movie about what things would be like if Jesus had never been born? Maybe something like the Roman Empire would still be around. Certainly the pilgrims would not have come to America to secure their religious freedoms, and as a result the United States, as we know it, would not exist. Imagine how that could have changed the world. Without Jesus, the world certainly could have been a much more dark and unforgiving place.

But through God's grace Jesus was born, and an unquenchable light began to shine in the darkness of the world. And tonight is the first church service of the Christmas season when we celebrate that light. All over the world, as midnight approaches, people are being drawn to 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 difficulties in the past year, and come for strength and support.

Perhaps some of you are here under a little duress. You're here because someone in your family or one of your friends prevailed upon you, and you rather would be home on the sofa, or having some eggnog, or quietly reading a book.

But the fact that you are here also says something. Perhaps it says that deep down in your soul, after we put aside all the jokes about church attendance, you really do want to hear the story one more time. Perhaps you really do want to believe that all this religion business is not just something people made up centuries ago. Perhaps you really hope there is more to Christmas than the glitter we see in the malls.

And finally many of us are here because we always are here. This is our home. We want once again to experience God and his only Son, and the love he extends to us, and the hope and salvation he offers.

II.

Most of us here are reasonably comfortable and well-off. If we compare ourselves with people who have less rather than people who have more, we probably would find ourselves toward the upper end of the scale. And we're 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 wants us to understand why the miracle in the manger in Bethlehem happened in the way that it did, and what it means.

Sometimes we can look at a situation and get one message, but miss another more important 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 probably recall, the Wright Brothers were the first people to fly an airplane. But as you might not know, they also were tinkerers, mechanics, and inventors of several things, and already were pretty well known around the Dayton area even before their historic flight.

Well, on December 17, 1903, on the beaches of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, 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 in Dayton. 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 in the local paper 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 was accurate, but it had missed the biggest story of the year. In the same way it is possible to overlook some important things when we hear the story of Jesus' birth so long ago.

III.

Let's go back to the story again. Obviously, a key part was the angel's proclamation, 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 is the source of salvation, the foundation of the Christian faith, and the reason the church exists.

But there also is something else not expressed in the text, but implicit in it. It goes beyond the actual words about Jesus birth, and extends to the circumstances surrounding that 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, according to the reading, 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, and those who have little and exist on the margins of life.

I speculated earlier about what the world would be like if Jesus had not been born. Let's speculate now about Jesus being born today, how it would happen. Now, I ask you to indulge me here because this 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.

Where would the manger be? Well, it probably would not be in the delivery room of a modern hospital, and might not even be in an emergency room or at home. Instead it might be in a shelter, or a fire station, or perhaps a community center.

And who would be Mary in 2007? Would it be any of us, or our daughters or granddaughters? Perhaps so. There are truly faithful people in this congregation. And a modern day 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 hopes were far more than her realities.

And where would this modern day Jesus be born? In America; in the most powerful nation in the world? That might be possible. 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.

And where do we think Jesus would carry out his ministry as a young man? Where would we find him? I think he would be where he always was. He would be with the poor and the needy, and those who just manage to get by. He 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. We come to sit in this sanctuary and renew our 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 understand once again what it means to be a Christian. The church not only is 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.

When we worship Jesus Christ during the year we often think of salvation. And when we do that we give thanks for what Jesus did for us in the next world and eternity. We praise Jesus for enabling us to be with him forever.

Tonight, however, we celebrate his birth and his life rather than his death and the next life. We think about this world and the here and now rather than the hereafter. And that means that we must remember and be responsive to the needs of others as we partake of our own blessings.

So, as we go home tonight and finish our 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? How can we give as well as receive at this holy time?

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 as we honor him we also are called to carry on now the work that he began then. *Amen.*