

Why Are We Here?

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2008

I.

Sometimes on occasions like this I look at all of you and ask myself, "What are we doing here?" "This is not Sunday morning, why have we come to church?" And for some of us it's already past our bedtime. So why aren't we home, or someplace else? There are a couple of answers.

One answer is simple. Just look at the calendar. It's Christmas Eve. Tomorrow is Christmas Day. We're celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Going to church on this night is just one of the things we do.

The other answer, however, is more complicated because it rests somewhere in our hearts, or our hopes, or our faith. Perhaps it's been a good year and we're here to give thanks. Or perhaps we're here for reasons described in the classic lyrics from Simon and Garfunkel. We're empty and aching and we don't know why. Or maybe we're somewhere in between. And so we come to search for truth, or to dispel doubts, or simply to know God again, or for the first time.

And a few of you probably are here under a little duress. You're here because someone in your family, or a friend, prevailed upon you to come, and if the truth be told you would rather be somewhere else, doing something different.

But for those who had doubts or were reluctant, the fact that you decided to be here says something. Perhaps it says that deep within your spirit, after we put aside all the jokes about coming to church on Christmas Eve and Easter, you want to hear the story one more time. Perhaps you want to believe that all this religion business is not just something people made up centuries ago. Perhaps you hope there is more to Christmas than the glitter of the malls.

Finally, many of us are here because we're always here. This is our home. We're here on Sundays, and we're here whenever the doors are open for worship. And we want once again to experience God and his only Son, to receive the love he offers, and to share that love with others.

II.

So, we come for a variety of reasons to celebrate the birth of our Lord. But there's another more basic question. Why was Jesus here? Why was he born in the first place? I'll give you a quick summary before I get specific. Jesus was both human and divine, and so he revealed God to us. He also offered salvation and eternal life in the next world, and God's peace and a sense of purpose in this world. And while he was here he taught us to love God and one another.

Now, that's a lot of stuff. There are several sermons in that answer. We'll learn more about eternal life and the hereafter during Lent and Easter. Tonight, however, I want to focus on the here and now, and how the story of that night two thousand years ago calls us to reach out to others in need. And we usually begin at the beginning with Christ in the manger.

And all over the world on this day people perform plays and sing music about that glorious event. We had a short play about it by our Amazing Praisers drama company at the 5:00 pm service. And it reminded me of the story of a church youth group that also was doing a play about Jesus' birth, and it came to the part where Joseph and Mary approached the innkeeper.

Well, the person playing the innkeeper had a reputation for practical jokes. And when Joseph asked for a room, the innkeeper didn't follow the script. Instead he ad-libbed and said, "Sure, come on in, we have plenty of space, I'll give you the best room in the house." Then a mischievous grin spread across his face.

At that point, the director of the play, standing off stage, had a sinking spell. What was going to happen next? Fortunately, the person playing Joseph was a quick thinker. He walked into the inn, took a look around, and said, "We would never stay in a dump like this. Come on Mary, let's go out to the barn." And the play resumed according to the script.

That leads the question I asked earlier: Why was Jesus here? The answer also is in the script, and it comes not from the fact of Jesus' birth itself but from the circumstances surrounding it. Sometimes, however, people miss the message. Sometimes they hear the words, but the words don't leave an impression. Here's an example to make that point.

I was born in Dayton, Ohio, which calls itself "The Birthplace of Aviation" because it also was the home of Wilbur and Orville Wright. And as you probably recall, the Wright brothers were the first people to actually fly an airplane.

On December 17, 1903, on the beaches of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilbur and Orville got their plane airborne for twelve seconds of controlled flight. When they finished Wilbur rushed to the telegraph office with a message for 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, they expected a front page story in the local paper about what they had achieved. They anticipated a headline that said "Wright Brothers Fly!" or something similar. But when the paper came out the next day there was no front page story at all. Instead, there was a small article on page nine 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's possible to overlook some important things when we hear this story of Jesus' birth.

III.

Let's go back to the Gospel reading. If we change our perspective a little we can see a message not expressed in the text, but implicit in it. It comes not from the literal words of Jesus' birth, but rather from the details in the background. And those details also have meaning.

Jesus was born in a barn and slept in a manger. It happened in a small obscure province far from the seats of world power. The only people there were Mary and Joseph, an ordinary young couple no one knew 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.

Now, God could have arranged for his Son to be born in any way he wanted. Jesus could have been born in a warm cozy room with family and friends waiting nearby. But God chose this way. And while Jesus came to serve and die for us all, the dismal circumstances under which he was born foreshadowed how his work would identify him with the oppressed and the powerless, the poor and the needy, and those who have little and exist on the margins of life.

Most of us here tonight are reasonably comfortable and well-off. And sometimes people in that position tend to measure themselves by looking at those who have more than they do. If, however, they compare themselves with people who have less rather than people who have more, they probably would find cause to be thankful. And in the same way we can be thankful. God wants us to have comfort and security.

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. Jesus came to give his love to all of us, but he spent most of his time ministering to people living in conditions like those of his own birth.

I once visited a church that emphasized caring for those in need. As I approached the church from the parking lot I noticed a sign hanging over the front door that said "Servants' Entrance." I thought that summarized a lot of theology in a few words. And when I left the church after the service I saw another message on the reverse side for those of us walking out. It said "You Are Now Entering the Mission Field."

Most churches don't actually have a sign like that, but the essential truth of both messages applies to us all. Jesus' birth means that we, like him, are to be servants in the Christian sense of the word. His birth reaffirms that there truly is a mission field where work must be done. And through his birth and the example of his life he calls us to care for those in the community who do not have the abundance and comfort with which we are blessed.

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 to 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 brings us together, but also sends us out, into the world, to do the work that God has given us to do.

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 and their counterparts today. How can we be shepherds? How can we help those do not have even the basics of life? As we partake of our own blessings, let us be ever-mindful of the needs of others.

And we should remember that it all began in a manger. From that lowly and humble beginning the world was changed. As we honor Jesus Christ here in his church, we also are called into the community to carry on his work. *Amen.*