

To Continue Our Lord's Work

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2009

I.

We're almost there. In a few hours our plans and preparations will come to pass, and Christmas Day will be upon us. We will gather with friends, or family, or perhaps just stay home and relax. Some of you might even come to our service at 10:00 am tomorrow morning.

But no matter what we do tomorrow, we are here tonight to celebrate the birth of our Lord, Jesus Christ. And as a way to emphasize the significance of that holy event, I would ask us to imagine, for a moment, what the world would be like, and what our lives would be like, if Jesus had not been born and had not carried out his ministry among us.

The most obvious difference would be that we would not be here right now. This building would not even be here. There would be no Christian church anywhere in the world. This probably would be just another ordinary evening.

And the United States would not exist as we know it. There would have been no pilgrims to come to the New World to secure their religious freedoms. Everything would be different. Without the spirit of goodness and love Jesus left behind, the world still could be run by dictators and tyrants.

That's the way it was two thousand years ago when the Roman Empire ruled the world with an iron fist. And without the transforming influence of Christianity, that empire or some stronger successor still could be in control. If you recall the Star Trek characters, we might well be living in a society not much different from that of the Klingons.

II.

But thankfully that is not what happened. 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, and the peace and hope it brings.

All over the world, as midnight approaches, people are being drawn to places of worship. They come to large cathedrals in big cities, and gather in small town churches and country chapels. Brave men and women in Iraq and Afghanistan pause to pray in field tents and quonset huts. People are coming together to share the meaning of this most important event in human history.

And we all have our own reasons for being here to celebrate the birth of our Lord and Savior. They rest somewhere in our hearts, or our hopes, or our faith. Perhaps 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.

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 many 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? We know Jesus offers salvation and eternal life in the next world. But tonight I want to focus on the here and now, and this world. That means thinking about how the story of that night two thousand years ago calls us to reach out to others in need.

And we can begin at the beginning with Christ in the manger, which reminds me of the story of a church youth group that was doing a play about Jesus' birth. It was much like the Christmas Pageant by our Amazing Praisers drama company at the 5:00 pm service.

Well, this other play came to the part where Joseph and Mary approached the innkeeper. And the person playing the innkeeper had a reputation for practical jokes. So when Joseph and Mary 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 rooms, I'll give you the best one 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.

III.

So, back to the question I asked earlier. Why was Jesus here? Part of the answer also is in the script, just below the surface as a subtext to the main message. It comes not from the fact of Jesus' birth but rather the circumstances surrounding it. Let's go to the Gospel reading and look at some of the details in the background.

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.

And 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.

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.

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.

And to whom would the angel Gabriel appear today? Who would be Mary in 2009? Would it be any of us, or our daughters or granddaughters? Well, perhaps. There are truly faithful people in this congregation. And a 2009 version of Mary would be a person of strong faith.

But if we follow the biblical tradition, 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 the poverty of Latin America, or Asia, or Africa, or in the struggles of Central Europe or the Mid-East.

What would that tell us about the work and mission of our hypothetical modern day Jesus? Where would he carry out his ministry today as a young man? Where would he send his disciples?

I think it would be the same now it was then. Jesus would be where he always was, and his followers would be there with him. It would be with the poor and the needy, and those who just get by. It would be with the sick and the elderly, and those the world has forgotten.

And that means Jesus' work would be done in Hancock County. People who live right here, among us, walk into the church office just about every day for help with the basics of life. Mothers feed their kids canned goods heated with propane lighters because they cannot pay their electric bills. Fathers and brothers with no medical care conceal their sickness and injuries just to stay on back-breaking jobs that barely pay the rent.

In Christ's love we try to help, but there's a lot more to be done. Jesus told us that the poor always will be with us (Mt 26:11). And he also said that the way we treat the poor and needy is the way he looks upon our treatment of him (Mt. 25:40, 46).

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.

We also 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 also are good things, and are pleasing to God.

But there is another part to it. We come to church to know 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.

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? How can we help those who have no place to turn?

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 Jesus Christ here in his church tonight, we also are called into the community tomorrow and every day to carry on his work. *Amen.*