

The World Was Changed

Luke 2:1-14

December 24, 2011

I.

Many of you might remember the movie, *It's a Wonderful Life*, a classic from 1946 that frequently is on television during the Christmas season. And even though it's an old movie, the theme is timeless. It applies to us today just as it spoke to our parents and grandparents years ago.

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

And through the angel's eyes George Bailey saw, in example after example, how his life had affected other people in extraordinary ways. He saw how he had enriched their lives, and how much he really meant to them.

What if there was a movie about the world if Jesus had not been born? Maybe something like the Roman Empire still would exist. We could have been ruled by tyrants and dictators for centuries.

Certainly there would have been no pilgrims to come here to secure their religious freedoms, and the United States would not exist. We would not be here tonight. There would be no Christian church anywhere in the world. This probably would be just an ordinary evening.

Without Jesus, the world would be a much more dark, and dangerous, and unforgiving place. If you recall the Star Trek movies, we could be living in a society not much different from that of the Klingons.

But that is not what happened. Jesus was born, and an unquenchable light began to shine into the darkness of the world. Tonight we celebrate that light, and the peace and hope it offers.

And I would like to ask three questions. First, what are we doing here? After we answer that we can consider what Jesus' birth means for us and the surrounding community. And finally, we can think about how the circumstances of Jesus' birth call us to a ministry to those who do not have the comforts with which we are blessed.

II.

Let's start with why we're even here. Why, all over the world, as midnight approaches, are people being drawn to places of worship? They congregate in large cathedrals, and gather in small town churches. People and families are coming together to worship, and pray, and sing, and to be with one another.

Why is that? This is not Sunday morning. And for some of us it's already past our bedtime. So why aren't we home, or someplace else? The answer probably rests somewhere in our hearts, or our hopes, or our faith.

Perhaps it has been a good year and we're here to give thanks. Or perhaps we're empty and searching. Or maybe we're in between. And so we come to seek the truth, or to dispel doubts, or simply to know God once again, or possibly 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 you actually might rather be somewhere else.

But the fact you are here says something. Perhaps you want to hear the story one more time. Or else you want to believe that religion is not just something people made up centuries ago. Perhaps you hope there is more to Christmas than the glitter of the malls.

And 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. We want once again to experience God and his only Son, to receive the love he offers, and to share that love with others.

III.

This leads to the next question. What does Jesus' birth mean for us in our community? We can begin with our Gospel reading, which reminds me of the story of a church youth group doing a play about Jesus' birth. It was something like the Christmas Pageant at our 5:00 pm service.

We'll pick up when Joseph and Mary came to the inn. And the person playing the innkeeper was known around school as a practical joker. So 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 rooms, I'll give you the best one in the house." Then a mischievous grin spread across his face.

At that moment, 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.

And the point is that there really is a script. That script is contained in the Bible. We know, for example, that Jesus' birth eventually led to God's offer of salvation and eternal life through him.

And we also know that our faith, also founded on the birth of our Lord and all that unfolded from that miraculous event, can be a source of hope, and comfort, and peace for us right now.

And we are called to pass it on because there are people right around us where we live, where we work, and where we carry our daily lives who have not received that wonderful news. For them Christmas is primarily *Frosty the Snowman* and *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. And those are catchy songs with memorable lyrics. I sing along when I hear them.

But the real meaning of tonight is found in the words of *Silent Night*, and *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. And we are called to express them in our lives as well as sing them in church.

IV.

So we come to the final question, which is what Christ's birth means for the world. And here the answer comes from the circumstances of his birth as well as the fact that it happened.

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. 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.

Let's ask ourselves, if Jesus would be born today, how would it happen? Now, I acknowledge this is entirely hypothetical, but let's just ask the question anyway, and see where it leads.

Where would the manger be? It probably would not be in a modern hospital, or even at home. Instead it might be in a shelter, or a fire station, or even a church basement.

And to whom would the angel Gabriel appear today? Who would be Mary in 2011? Would it be any of us, or our daughters or granddaughters? Well, perhaps. There are truly faithful people in this congregation. And a contemporary version of Mary would be a person of strong faith.

But if we follow tradition, it probably would be a poor young woman, struggling to make ends meet. It probably would be someone from a humble background 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. Our nation has 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 the Mid-East.

What would all that tell us about the work and mission of our hypothetical modern day Jesus? And 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 with him. It would be with the poor and needy, and those who just get by. It would be with the sick and elderly, and those the world has forgotten.

And that work is here Hancock County. People who live nearby come into the church office about every day for help with the basics of life. Mothers feed their kids canned goods heated with propane because they cannot pay their electric bills. Fathers with no medical care conceal sickness or injuries just to stay on back-breaking jobs that barely pay the rent.

Jesus told us the poor always will be with us (Mt 26:11). He also said the way we treat the needy is how he looks upon our treatment of him (Mt. 25:40, 46).

V.

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

We also are here tonight to renew our faith. We come to hear the familiar music, and see the beautiful decorations, and to receive communion. Those also are good things.

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

So, as we go home tonight, 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 in need or who do not know the Lord?

Jesus died to save us all, but he lived to teach love and compassion. 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 speak his truth and carry on his work. *Amen.*