

Counting From the Birth of God
Christmas Eve, 2008
Caldwell Memorial Presbyterian Church

Scripture:

Old Testament: Isaiah 9:2-7

New Testament: Luke 2:1-20

If there is one thing we can say about the year 2008, it is that we should never again take lightly the business of buying and selling homes. Between investors speculating in homes like stocks, lenders experimenting with flavors of loans like Baskin & Robbins experiments with ice cream and borrowers forgetting that what goes up does sometimes come down, we seemed to have forgotten that buying a home is supposed to be a very big deal.

In one of his books, the theologian Karl Barth reminds us that buying and selling real estate was once thought of as serious business. He tells of coming across a six-hundred-year old contract for the sale of a house that began with these words:

“Given at Basle (Switzerland) on the first Monday after Pope Urban’s day in the one thousand three hundred seventy first year counting from the birth of God.”¹

“... counting from the birth of God.”

Now if that’s the way they had done business when I was in banking, I might never have changed careers. Ok, probably not. But we could use a dose of that kind of seriousness in our financial affairs today, couldn’t we?

In fact, wouldn’t we be better off altogether if we applied that primary orientation to God not just for our financial affairs, but for our entire lives?

“... counting from the birth of God.”

It’s a phrase that should stop us in our tracks. “The birth of God.” Can we even begin to get our heads around that? The God whose origins transcend our understanding, whose span, scope, power, sovereignty and presence we could never fathom, chose to be “born” just like you and me, come into the world as a red, squirmy, squalling bundle

¹ With thanks to Rev. Dr. John B. Rogers, who notes this finding in his book [The Birth of God, Recovering the Mystery of Christmas](#)

of life, as human as they come, but also infinitely divine. A babe born in a barn to a couple of parents the world had never heard of.

And time was forever reset.

But, stop and think about all the clocks in our lives. Do they ever read the same time, as if they were synchronized to one moment, the most important event ever recorded?

Or do we drift through our days with the various clocks of our lives all reading slightly different times – the clock on the computer, the clock on the wall at work and the one at home in the kitchen ... the one on the bedside table that you look at before you go to sleep and the one on the coffee pot that you stare at as you try to wake up in the morning?

And what about the one in the car? That's the one I set a few minutes ahead, just in case it might help me get somewhere early for a change. I wonder if, just sometimes, God looks down with a little embarrassment at my inane efforts to try to trick myself into being early.

What if all the displays on the clocks in our lives ended with the message "counting from the birth of God?"

That would change how we think about our days, wouldn't it?

I guess we will never really know when it happened – when God's people, at least those who don't live in monasteries and nunneries, stopped framing our calendars and ordering our days "counting from the birth of God."

The prophet Isaiah tells of how an entire nation had looked forward to one moment, the coming of the long-awaited messiah. Did you hear how he described what would happen? How a light would shine on those who had walked in darkness? How the rod of the oppressor would be broken, counting from the birth of God? How the nation would be multiplied and its joy increased, and how the boots of the tamping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire, counting from the birth of God.

Did you hear the account in the Gospel of Luke – how the Roman emperor thought he controlled the national calendar when he sent out a decree requiring all to go to their native town to be registered in a census?

Perhaps God giggled a bit at his presumption, a little like with me and my foolery with the clock in my car.

Then it happened.

While they were in Bethlehem, “Mary gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” (Luke 2:7)

Counting from the birth of God, everything was suddenly and eternally different.

Counting from the birth of God, God said don’t ever look upon the meek and the lowly as you did before.

Counting from the birth of God, all authority would rest on the tiny shoulders of a child king named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace ... and that authority would grow continually ... even to today.

Counting from the birth of God, we would know how desperately God desires to draw near to us.

Counting from the birth of God, we would know there is no distance too far, no pain too great, no sacrifice too personal for God to make to show divine love for us.

Counting from the birth of God, we would see our creator in the life-changing light of grace and never have to walk in darkness again.

How do we respond when eternity is redefined, when we are given bold signs of God’s kingdom to come? How do we respond when our sins forgiven and when the gates to salvation are flung open?

We can respond as the angels did in Bethlehem that night, singing “Glory to God in the highest.” We can go tell others, as the shepherds did, glorifying and praising God for all they had seen. Or we can reply, as Mary did, quietly and privately, pondering the meaning of all this in our hearts.

Perhaps what is best, though, is for us to wake in the morning, and begin again, counting from the birth of our savior.

“For unto us, a child is born, unto us a son is given.”

Amen