

DECEMBER 30, 2010 - FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS DAY

SERMON: THE JOURNEY FROM HOPE TO JOY

WELL. THE RIBBONS, THE BOWS, AND THE WRAPPING PAPER HAVE ALL BEEN GATHERED UP OFF THE FLOOR. THE IN-LAWS HAVE GONE BACK HOME. THE GIFTS HAVE BEEN SORTED INTO THE USUAL CATEGORIES: KEEP, RETURN, AND “WHY DON’T WE JUST RE-GIFT THIS ONE?” THE FRANTIC COMING AND GOING THAT IS SUCH A PART OF THE HOLIDAY SEASON FOR SOME OF US HAS BEEN DIALED-BACK JUST A NOTCH.

IT SEEMS THAT, MORE THAN AT ANY OTHER TIME OF THE YEAR, WE AMERICANS ARE ON THE MOVE AT CHRISTMAS...COMING AND GOING AT A FRANTIC PACE. IF YOU TRIED TO GET TO THE MALL LAST WEEK TO DO SOME LAST-MINUTE SHOPPING, IT MAY HAVE SEEMED LIKE EVERYONE IN CHARLOTTE WAS ON THE ROAD. TRIPLE-A, THE AMERICAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION, ESTIMATES THAT MORE THAN 92 MILLION TRAVELERS WILL TAKE TRIPS OF AT LEAST FIFTY MILES FROM THEIR HOMES DURING THIS HOLIDAY SEASON.

SO, STATISTICALLY, THAT TELLS ME THAT MANY OF YOU HERE THIS MORNING MADE SOME KIND OF JOURNEY THIS PAST WEEK—PERHAPS TO SPEND TIME WITH A PARENT; OR A SON OR DAUGHTER AT CHRISTMAS. OR MAYBE YOU ARE THE ONE WHO IS HOSTING FAMILY OR FRIENDS WHO HAVE TRAVELLED A TO BE WITH YOU DURING THE HOLIDAYS.

AT MYERS PARK PRESBYTERIAN, MY HOME CHURCH, WE HELD A FULL CHRISTMAS EVE WORSHIP SERVICE ON DECEMBER 19TH--THE WEDNESDAY NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS. CALLED A 'TRAVELLER'S SERVICE', IT ACKNOWLEDGES THE MODERN REALITY THAT MANY OF OUR MEMBERS WILL SPEND THE ENTIRE PERIOD BETWEEN CHRISTMAS AND NEW YEARS SOMEWHERE OTHER THAN CHARLOTTE.

THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH HAS ALSO BEEN ON A JOURNEY THIS MONTH—ALONG WITH MOST OTHER MAINLINE DENOMINATIONS. THE JOURNEY OF ADVENT--FOR US, A TIME OF GREAT EXPECTATION AND HOPE.

AND THEN, ON CHRISTMAS EVE--WITH THE LIGHTING OF THE CHRIST CANDLE--WE TRAVELLED FROM HOPE TO JOY AS WE CELEBRATED THE MOST IMPORTANT JOURNEY IN HUMAN HISTORY—THE ONE THAT NONE OF US COULD HAVE PLANNED, OR ANTICIPATED, OR EVEN IMAGINED.

A JOURNEY THAT WOULD NOT JUST CHANGE HUMAN HISTORY, BUT THE VERY FUTURE OF THE CREATED ORDER. FOR ON CHRISTMAS EVE, WE COMMEMORATE THE JOURNEY OF GOD--THE LORD GOD OF THE UNIVERSE--FROM HEAVEN TO EARTH. TO TAKE ON HUMAN FLESH, AND BE BORN AS AN INFANT IN THE STABLE OF A ROADSIDE INN IN BETHLEHEM.

AND NOW, ON THIS FIRST SUNDAY AFTER CHRISTMAS, THE LECTIONARY HAS GIVEN US AS OUR GOSPEL READING A STORY ABOUT YET ANOTHER JOURNEY THAT MARY, JOSEPH AND THE BOY JESUS MADE—TWELVE YEARS AFTER THAT FIRST NIGHT IN BETHLEHEM.

OF THE FOUR BIBLICAL GOSPELS, ONLY MATTHEW AND LUKE CONTAIN AN ACCOUNT OF JESUS' BIRTH. AND ONLY LUKE INCLUDES A STORY THAT TAKES PLACE DURING JESUS' BOYHOOD. IT IS JUST 11 VERSES LONG, AND PASTOR ROGERS READ IT FOR US A FEW MINUTES AGO. BUT IT IS SO CAREFULLY-WRITTEN AND GIVES US SUCH RICH INSIGHTS INTO THE GOD THAT WE WORSHIP IN JESUS CHRIST, THAT IT RICHLY DESERVES THE ATTENTION THAT WE GIVE IT ON THIS SPECIAL SUNDAY.

TO PUT THE STORY IN CONTEXT, REMEMBER THAT--ALTHOUGH JESUS WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM--MARY AND JOSEPH ACTUALLY LIVED IN NAZARETH--A SMALL TOWN IN THE NORTH OF ISRAEL. THEY HAD GONE TO BETHLEHEM, JOSEPH'S TRIBAL HOMELAND, TO BE REGISTERED FOR THE ROMAN CENSUS.

AFTER JESUS' BIRTH AND RITUAL PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE IN NEARBY JERUSALEM, LUKE SAYS THAT MARY AND JOSEPH WENT BACK HOME TO NAZARETH--AND THAT IS WHERE THE BOY JESUS GREW UP.

IN VERSE 41 OF THE TEXT, WE LEARN THAT--LIKE MOST OBSERVANT HEBREWS--THE FAMILY OF JESUS TRAVELLED TO JERUSALEM EVERY YEAR TO CELEBRATE THE FESTIVAL OF THE PASSOVER. AND WHEN JESUS WAS 12-YEARS-OLD, LUKE SAYS, "THEY WENT UP AS USUAL FOR THE FESTIVAL."

SOUNDS PRETTY SIMPLE. BUT JERUSALEM IS ABOUT 75 MILES SOUTH OF NAZARETH. TRY AND IMAGINE LIVING IN NORTH WILKESBORO AND HAVING TO WALK--OR RIDE A DONKEY--TO UPTOWN CHARLOTTE AND

BACK EVERY YEAR. THE GEOGRAPHY OF THIS TRIP IS ASTOUNDING—EVEN TODAY, WITH MODERN FORMS OF TRANSPORTATION.

IN ALL LIKLIHOOD, THEY WENT SOUTHWEST FROM NAZARETH; DOWN THE JEZREEL VALLEY TO THE JORDAN RIVER; THEN FIFTY MILES SOUTH ALONG THE RIVER VALLEY TO JERICHO; AND THEN UP THE STEEP AND DANGEROUS JERICHO ROAD TO JERUSALEM.

THANKFULLY, THEY DIDN'T HAVE TO TRAVEL ALONE IT SAYS THAT JESUS AND HIS FAMILY WERE IN THE COMPANY OF FRIENDS AND RELATIVES. AND, WHEN THE FESTIVAL WAS OVER AND THEY STARTED HOME, MARY AND JOSEPH WEREN'T WORRIED THAT JESUS WASN'T WITH THEM BECAUSE THEY ASSUMED HE WAS SOMEWHERE ELSE IN THE GROUP THAT WAS HEADED BACK TO NAZARETH.

LUKE SAYS THEY TRAVELLED FOR AN ENTIRE DAY BEFORE REALIZING THAT HE WASN'T THERE, AND TURNED BACK TO JERUSALEM TO SEARCH FOR HIM. THREE DAYS LATER, THEY FOUND HIM IN THE TEMPLE, SITTING AMONG THE TEACHERS, LISTENING TO THEM AND ASKING THEM QUESTIONS.

YOU CAN IMAGINE THE ANGUISH THAT MARY AND JOSEPH MUST HAVE EXPERIENCED FOR THOSE THREE DAYS (AND NIGHTS) AS THEY SEARCHED FOR THEIR MISSING BOY. AND WHAT DO YOU SAY WHEN YOU FINALLY FIND A LOST CHILD? IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST PARENTS, YOU ARE

RELIEVED AND THANKFUL; AND FILLED WITH JOY; AND YOU WANT TO HUG THE CHILD. AND THEN RING HIS NECK FOR PUTTING YOU THROUGH THIS.

OUR MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE SANITIZES THIS PART OF THE STORY. VERSE 48 SAYS THAT WHEN THEY FOUND THE BOY JESUS, HIS MOTHER SAID TO HIM, ‘CHILD, WHY HAVE YOU TREATED US LIKE THIS? LOOK, YOUR FATHER AND I HAVE BEEN SEARCHING FOR YOU IN GREAT ANXIETY.’ IN LUKE’S ORIGINAL VERSION, IT’S MORE LIKE: “LOOK HERE YOUNG MAN, WE HAVE BEEN IN TORMENT SEARCHING FOR YOU.”

AND THEN, IN VERSE 49, WE READ THE FIRST WORDS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE. JESUS SAYS TO MARY, “WHY WERE YOU SEARCHING FOR ME? DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT I MUST BE IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE?” OR, AS THE OLD KING JAMES VERSION PUTS IT: “DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT I MUST BE ABOUT MY FATHER'S BUSINESS?”

THERE ARE SEVERAL WAYS TO SAY “MUST BE” IN NEW TESTAMENT GREEK, AND HERE LUKE USES THE ONE THAT SIGNALS ABSOLUTE INEVITABILITY. THE GREEK WORD *DEI* MEANS: “IT IS NECESSARY”. AND WHEN YOU HEAR IT USED IN THE BIBLE WITH REGARD TO A RELIGIOUS OBLIGATION, IT IS USUALLY DECLARING SOMETHING TO BE THE WILL OF GOD. SO JESUS IS SAYING TO MARY AND JOSEPH: “DID YOU NOT KNOW THAT IT IS INEVITABLE THAT YOU WOULD FIND ME DOING THE WILL OF GOD THE FATHER?”

HERE, IN THESE FIRST RECORDED WORDS OF JESUS IN THE GOSPEL OF LUKE—SPOKEN WHEN HE WAS ONLY 12 YEARS OLD—THERE IS AWARENESS ON HIS PART THAT HE IS ALREADY FULFILLING GOD’S PURPOSES FOR HIS LIFE. AS BIBLE SCHOLAR R. ALAN CULPEPPER WRITES IN HIS COMMENTARY ON THE GOSPEL OF LUKE IN THE *NEW INTERPRETER’S BIBLE*, "IN THIS RESPONSE TO MARY, JESUS IS ESTABLISHING HIS IDENTITY AS THE SON OF GOD, AND SIGNALLING THAT HIS LIFE WILL BE GUIDED BY HIS UNIQUE RELATIONSHIP TO THE FATHER."

WE KNOW THAT MARY AND JOSEPH HAD SOME INKLING OF WHO THIS CHILD WAS. THE ANGEL GABRIEL HAD SAID TO MARY THAT THIS BABY WOULD BE HOLY; AND WOULD BE CALLED THE SON OF GOD. AND WE KNOW FROM THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW THAT AN ANGEL HAD TOLD JOSEPH THAT THIS BABY WOULD "SAVE HIS PEOPLE FROM THEIR SINS." BUT, LIKE US, NEITHER JOSEPH NOR MARY COULD HAVE FORESEEN THE CROSS AND THE EMPTY TOMB. AND LUKE SAYS IN VERSE 50 THAT MARY AND JOSEPH "DID NOT UNDERSTAND WHAT JESUS HAD SAID TO THEM."

IT IS IN THE FINAL TWO VERSES OF THE STORY, I THINK, THAT WE READ THE MOST ASTOUNDING DETAIL OF ALL. IT SAYS THAT JESUS GOES BACK HOME TO NAZARETH WITH HIS FAMILY. THAT HE WAS OBEDIENT TO THEM. AND THAT HE ADVANCED IN WISDOM AND GRACE; AND IN DIVINE AND HUMAN FAVOR.

HERE, LUKE IS TELLING US THAT JESUS WOULD BE SHAPED BY GRACE. NOT JUST THE DIVINE GRACE OF GOD THE FATHER, BUT ALSO BY THE GRACE OF HIS PARENTS AND OTHER PEOPLE. HE WOULD BE AWARE OF HIS DIVINITY, YET WILLING TO SUBJECT HIMSELF TO HUMANITY.

THIS BRIEF STORY ABOUT THE BOY JESUS, SURROUNDED BY FAMILY AND NEIGHBORS...WILLING TO SIT IN THE SEAT OF RELIGIOUS LEARNING IN THE TEMPLE IN JERUSALEM AND LISTEN TO THE TEACHERS...TELLS US SOMETHING VERY IMPORTANT ABOUT THE GOD THAT WE HAVE COME HERE TO WORSHIP THIS MORNING.

IT REVEALS A GOD WHO IS PASSIONATELY INTERESTED-IN AND COMMITTED-TO HUMANITY. A GOD WHO HAS CHOSEN NOT TO BE GOD WITHOUT HUMANITY, IN THE WORDS OF REFORMED THEOLOGIAN KARL BARTH.

THE WORDS AND ACTIONS OF THE BOY JESUS POINT FORWARD TO THE MAN JESUS CHRIST. WHO SAID HE CAME TO HEAL THE SICK, AND NOT THE WELL. WHO CAME TO SAVE SINNERS AND NOT THE RIGHTEOUS. WHO ESPECIALLY LOVED THE PEOPLE THAT ESTABLISHED RELIGION HAD MADE TO FEEL ODD, DIFFERENT, NOT WELCOME. WHO SAT AND ATE WITH SINNERS AND TAX COLLECTORS, AND REFUSED TO CONDEMN A PERSON WHO WAS CAUGHT IN ADULTRY.

THERE ARE NO SCIENTIFIC RULES THAT EXPLAIN THE “HOW” OF INCARNATION. HOW IT HAPPENED IS A MYSTERY THAT REMAINS BEYOND

HUMAN UNDERSTANDING. BUT, IN JESUS CHRIST, WE DO KNOW THE “WHY” OF INCARNATION: GOD’S STEADFAST LOVE FOR HUMAN BEINGS...LIKE US.

SO WHAT MIGHT OUR OWN LIVES LOOK LIKE IF WE LIVED THEM WITH A RADICAL AWARENESS OF THIS GOD'S LOVE FOR US?

I THINK IT MIGHT LOOK LIKE CALDWELL HOUSE. LIKE LA POSADA. LIKE BLUE CHRISTMAS. LIKE CALDWELL VOLUNTEERS FINDING JOY UP ON A ROOFTOP PUTTING SHINGLES ON A HABITAT-FOR-HUMANITY HOUSE.

AND IN HIS PASTOR’S MESSAGE IN THIS MONTH’S *CALDWELL GOOD NEWS*, REVEREND CLEGHORN WRITES ABOUT THE WAY IN WHICH SOME YOUNG ADULTS IN THIS CHURCH HAVE BEEN INSPIRED BY THE HOLY SPIRIT TO LIVE THIS OUT. HIS MESSAGE IS ENTITLED: "THE 12 DAY EFFECT".

YOU SEE, UP UNTIL THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION, CHRISTMAS WAS UNIVERSALLY CELEBRATED AS A 12-DAY FESTIVAL—CALLED CHRISTMASTIDE—THAT BEGAN ON CHRISTMAS EVE AND LASTED UNTIL THE EPHIPANY OF THE LORD ON JANUARY 6TH. BUT, FOR MANY OF THE REFORMERS, CHRISTMAS OBSERVANCES WERE CONSIDERED IDOLATROUS—UNDESIRABLE REMNANTS OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM. THE ENGLISH PURITANS WERE PARTICULARLY HOSTILE TO CHRISTMAS, AND WENT TO GREAT LENGTHS TO SUPPRESS IT.

AN ARTICLE IN THE PAPER LAST WEEK, ENTITLED: “WHEN CHRISTMAS WAS BANNED IN MASSACHUSSETS” SAID THAT, WHEN THE PURITAN PILGRIMS ESTABLISHED PLYMOUTH COLONY IN 1620, THEY MADE

IT ILLEGAL TO TAKE OFF WORK ON DECEMBER 25TH, OR TO COMMEMORATE THE LORD'S BIRTH IN ANY OUTWARD WAY. IN FACT, CHRISTMAS DID NOT BECOME A LEGAL HOLIDAY IN MASSACHUSSETS UNTIL 1856.

WHEN AMERICAN PROTESTANTS FINALLY RECOVER THE OBSERVANCE OF CHRISTMAS, WHAT WE GOT FOR THE MOST PART WAS JUST CHRISTMAS DAY—WITHOUT THE OTHER 11 DAYS. AND NOW WE'VE EVOLVED A SECULAR CHRISTMAS SEASON THAT BEGINS IN EARLY NOVEMBER AND ENDS ON CHRISTMAS DAY, INSTEAD OF BEGINNING ON CHRISTMAS EVE AND EXTENDING FORWARD FOR 12 DAYS.

THE OLD ENGLISH CHRISTMAS CAROL THAT BEGINS: "ON THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS, MY TRUE LOVE GAVE TO ME: A PARTRIDGE IN A PEAR TREE." IS MORE THAN JUST A FRIVOLOUS HOLIDAY DIVERSION. IT IS THE EVIDENCE THAT CHRISTMAS WAS ONCE WHAT PASTOR CLEGHORN CALLS: "A 12-DAY SEASON OF JUBILANT PRAISE THAT CHRIST HAS COME TO WELL AMONG US."

HE WRITES THAT THE CALDWELL YOUNG ADULTS GROUP ASKED THEMSELVES: "WHAT IF WE OBSERVED THE CHRISTMAS SEASON THIS YEAR BY GIVING OF OURSELVES ON EACH OF THE DAYS OF CHRISTMAS? IT MIGHT WORK LIKE THIS: ON THE FIRST DAY OF CHRISTMAS, WE DO ONE THING FOR ONE OTHER PERSON; ON THE SECOND DAY WE DO SOMETHING FOR TWO PEOPLE AND SO ON. OVER THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS, THAT'S 66 ACTS OF GIVING KINDNESS PER PERSON.

IN DOING THIS, THE YOUNG ADULTS INSPIRE ONE ANOTHER, AND REMIND US THAT WE ARE STILL IN THE SEASON OF GIVING PRAISE FOR THE ARRIVAL OF OUR LORD.

REGARDLESS OF WHAT AGE YOU ARE THIS MORNING, YOU CAN PARTICIPATE WITH THE HOLY SPIRIT IN LIVING OUT THE "12 DAY EFFECT". BY JOINING WITH THE YOUNG ADULTS; BY GETTING INVOLVED IN ONE OF THE PROJECTS THAT YOU SEE MENTIONED IN *CALDWELL GOOD NEWS*, BY JOINING IN MORTAR FOR MISSION, OR INVOLVING YOURSELF IN ONE OF THE VISIONING TEAMS THAT WILL BE FORMING EARLY IN THE NEW YEAR. NOT SO GOD WILL LOVE YOU MORE. NOT TO GET SAVED. BUT JUST TO LIVE YOUR LIFE SO GOD CAN USE YOU, LIKE THE SONG SAYS.

WE WORSHIP A GOD THAT IS PASSIONATELY INTERESTED IN AND COMMITTED TO HUMANITY. THAT IS WHY WE ARE STILL SINGING CHRISTMAS CAROLS. IT'S WHY, FOR US, CHRISTMAS IS FAR RICHER AND DEEPER THAN JUST A BRIEF, SENTIMENTAL REMEMBRANCE OF THE BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD OF JESUS. WE CELEBRATE THE 12 DAYS OF CHRISTMAS. BECAUSE—IN THE JOURNEY FROM ADVENT TO EPIPHANY--WE MAKE THE JOURNEY FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT; FROM YEARNING TO MANIFESTATION; FROM THE HOPE THAT CHRIST WILL COME TO THE JOY THAT CHRIST HAS COME.

JOY TO THE WORLD!

AMEN.