

Sermon 12-24-09¹

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

The Wonders of His Love

There's a children's Christmas play called *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever*. It's about a family of poor kids named Herdman who hijack a children's Christmas pageant. "How do children hijack a pageant," you might wonder. Well the Herdman kids take all the important roles through intimidation and force. As their performance spirals out of control into chaos, "the youngest Herdman, who plays the angel announcing the Messiah's birth to the shepherds, yells out over the din, 'Hey! Unto you a child is born!'"²

Needless to say, there's a lot of chaos that comes with this time of year: chaos from families, chaos from parties and get-togethers, the chaos of gift giving and receiving; there's even chaos in all the travel arrangements that are often made. Yet slicing through the roar of the chaos and confusion is the glorious good news of great joy through which we hear the wonders of God's marvelous love: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a savior." Within those words we are brought back to reality; reminded of who our God is and what he has done for us.

While we might think that chaos and turmoil are something new in the lives of families, our Gospel reading from Luke says otherwise. "In those days," Luke informs us, "Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the world." Now, figuring out this census business is like figuring out Allegheny County's reassessment mess. For those

¹ Sermon preached by the Rev. Thomas Moore on Thursday, December 24, 2009 at Emsworth UP Church on the occasion of our Lord's Incarnation. ©2009

² Robert Redman, "Luke 2:1-14 (15-20) – Theological Perspective" *Feasting on the Word, Year C, vol. 1* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), 116

living in Israel, they know that the only reason the government is calling for a census is so they know how much to tax and no matter how inconvenient it is to the rest of the people, the empire will have its way. Imagine what it would have looked like, the chaos and confusion an endeavor like this would involve. Everyone's trying to get to their ancestral hometown so that they can get this census-business taken care of as quickly as possible. And it couldn't have come at a worse time for a young couple like Mary and Joseph; you know, Mary being pregnant and ready to pop. Can you imagine what it would have looked like if this were to happen today?

"Welcome to Sepphoris International Airport, how may I help you?" Hi, my name is Joseph, son of David, I'm traveling with my wife Mary to Bethlehem, we're here to check our bags and get our seat assignments. You don't happen to have anything with a lot of legroom? You see, my wife is pregnant and we could use a little extra space on the flight. "Oh, I'm sorry, the only seats we have are in the back of the plane next to the engines. How many bags will you be checking?" We have three bags. "Okay. That will be an additional \$100." \$100, that's outrageous. "Well, I'm sorry sir, but that's our policy. You were made aware of this when you booked your flight online." I live in Nazareth, we don't have internet there, and no one told me about it over the phone. Fine, fine, we need to make our flight. Here's your money. "Thank you sir, have a nice day."

I can see Joseph grumbling, "stupid checked bag fee, \$100 dollars, I'll tell you where you can stick your hundred dollars..." as Mary interjects, "It could be worse. You could be the one who's about to give birth any minute now. Oh wait, that's me." Continuing on, they arrive at the security checkpoint. Joseph sails through the metal detector with flying colors but he was forced to give up the baby oil and Mary's favorite hand lotion in the process. As

Mary is about to pass through, the guard stops her. “Ma’am, I need you to remove your shoes.” You’ve got to be kidding me, remove my shoes from these swollen feet? “Sorry ma’am, it’s Herod’s policy; safety precautions and all that. It’s scary times out there and no matter how innocent you might look I still need you to remove your shoes.” Now it’s Mary’s turn to grumble under her breath: “Don’t you know who I am, I’m the servant of the Lord, I’m carrying the Son of God. O, you just wait and see!” After a few more harrowing experiences, Mary and Joseph finally get to Bethlehem, arrive at the family farm and discover that all the guestrooms are being used. They’ll have to sleep in loft in the barn.

While it’s a different way of imagining the journey of Joseph and Mary, it reminds us that these were too very ordinary people living in the midst of a chaotic situation who were called upon by the Lord God to play an extraordinary role involving the salvation of the world. While “in those days,” many had either given up on God’s promises or they expected them to come with a lot of bells and whistles, the grace of God sneaks into the world in, through, and as the infant Jesus, shattering expectations and all the world thought they knew about God. In this way, the birth of Jesus reveals the wonders of God’s love to all. Within that little town of Bethlehem, far from the hand of Caesar and the power of Herod, “a child has been born for us, a son given to us.” In this tiny corner of the world, the grace of God sneaks in with authority on his shoulders. He is named “wonderful counselor, mighty God, everlasting Father, prince of peace.” This moment, the incarnation of God in Jesus, peels back the veneer of the ordinary and mundane to reveal to us the wonders of God’s love for a world trapped in the clutches of sin; the depths of his salvation, the heights of new life, and the breadth of his glory.

Now some of you might be thinking, “Why do we hear this same story over and over again each year? Do we read it simply to feel nostalgic as we remember Christmas’ past?” Simply put, we gather together at the manger each year to be refreshed by the good news of what God has done for us; we gather together to remember the wonders of God’s love for us. We don’t do this to feel good about ourselves or to get some great spiritual high. Rather, in gathering together in the midst of worship on Christmas Eve we remember that we’re part of this story; our lives are shaped and given a distinctive character because of the story of God’s incarnation, God’s wonderful love shown forth in Jesus Christ.

The opening of Luke’s Gospel is so much more than the picture of a cute, cuddly infant lying in a manger surrounded by his mother and Joseph. It’s a story about how far God is willing to go to call his people back to himself; how far God is willing to go for you and me. In a world where hope has been lost, where greed and corruption abound, we’re used to people being less than honest and we’re used to people holding back. Friends, we’re reminded here that God holds nothing back to see his salvation of the world made complete; we’re reminded that all the promises made of old are fulfilled this day. We learn as much in the announcement to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. “For see,” proclaims the angel of the Lord, “I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people: for unto you is born this day in the city of David as Savior, who is the Christ, the Lord.” Basking in the glow of this good news of great joy, we come to know the full wonder of God’s love for us: Staring into the face of Jesus Christ we come to know that we see God nowhere else than in him. He is our light and life. Staring into the face of Jesus we stare into the face of the Lord God Almighty and we come to know that redemption is found in him alone.

You see, we don't worship a God who could care less about us. On the contrary, we worship the Lord God who took sight of the sorry state sin has made of us; who rolled up his sleeves and plunged to the depths of that sin to bring light to those who sit in darkness. We listen to this story again and again because it bears witness to the wonders of God's love for us; a love known in the infant Jesus. We listen to this story knowing that we are a part of it, that it redefines our lives, our priorities, and everything we do; not because we deserve it but because Jesus himself is God's free gift to us.

Too often within the hectic pace of the Christmas season, the chaos and turmoil that come with it, we spend our time trying to fit God into our "busy" lives. We steal moments here and there where we'll let God be involved but then we push him away because we can't be bothered or we allow other things to take hold of our attention. Yet the glory of Christmas, the reminder of the wonders of God's love is that just when we try and fit God into our lives, Jesus is standing there inviting us to find the fullness of our lives in him. There's no making room for us with Jesus, no trying to fit us in. It is the joy of his ministry as savior, as the child born for us to welcome us with open arms; to invite us to live into our union with him and, through the power of the Spirit, allow our lives to be so fully overcome by his. He comes to us, inviting us to fling wide the doors of our lives and allow him to rearrange the furniture. Throughout the year, we spend our day-to-day lives like the Herdman children, putting on a Christmas pageant that spins more and more out of control. And so from time to time, someone needs to cut through the noise and proclaim again and again: "Hey, unto you a child is given!" Reminding us of God's wonderful love centered in Jesus our savior. Praise, glory, and honor be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit; now and unto ages of ages. Amen.