

FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH

9244 Five Forks Road

Waynesboro, PA 17268-9612

Tel: (717) 762-2991

SCRIPTURE: Luke 1:

DATE: 2018-12-23

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Jesus Messiah

Series: Heaven came down

THEME: A Messiah different than expected

SERMON: "Jesus: An Unlikely Messiah"

Introduction

What are your Christmas Eve/Day traditions? Things that, if we are honest, we say they must happen for us or it wasn't the perfect Christmas?

Christmas caroling, Christmas programs/pageants, going around to look at the beautiful Christmas lights, hot chocolate at Grandma's, opening gifts – there must be some surprises, a big feast with everyone home – nobody choosing to stay away. Everyone in their pajamas. In Zambia, my mother would make dozens of donuts for the whole community and on Christmas morning we would take them around to all the neighbors – what fun. But also as a kid growing up, there was always a church service. (That was excruciatingly painful to have to put your toys down and go to church.)

We could go on and on for hours. What if this is what Christmas has become for us? Just all the good and fun traditions and the nostalgia. And we may have lost sight of the One, Jesus, whose birthday we are celebrating. It's the day we celebrate **heaven coming down** (series graphic) to earth in the form of a person. God, Himself come to earth, physically.

In order to help keep that from happening, many families take time to read the Christmas story together. I recommend this tradition to you – maybe read it in a different translation so you hear fresh and new.

This advent season I read of one family that has a Christmas tradition of an impromptu nativity reenactment. Christiana says it goes like this. **"Someone reads from the Gospel account and we bring out a big pile of potential costumes for everyone to choose a part and act it out on the spot. It's a beautiful mess.**

This year, Anika, my 5 year old, wants to be Mary. How sweet, except her personality doesn't necessarily fit the stereotypical Mary – meek and mild, quiet, pondering expression, gazing into the ever sleeping baby Jesus' face, as she sits quietly as the humble servant of the Lord.

Anika is bold, mischievous, clever, wild, free and adventuresome. She often lives life off the script.” (I think I have a granddaughter that fits that description quite well.)

Anika's mom though pauses – “I wonder if Anika resembles some of the characteristics of the real Mary more than tradition would have us believe. So I am letting Anika pick out her own Mary costume this year. I wouldn't be surprised if she chooses bright colors and frills, and a wild hairdo.” (Don't you just love what the children open our minds to explore?)

I want to help us think about the original Christmas story, not the neat sanitized version we often tell. I want to remind us of the unexpected way Jesus came to live among us and the unexpected things he came to do. It might challenge some of our traditional reenactments of the story and perhaps some of our ponderings and even activities this Christmas. Luke starts:

Jesus' Unlikely Manner of Coming

Luke 2:1 At that time the Roman emperor, (Caesar) Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. ³ Everyone had to travel to his or her hometown to complete the mandatory census. ⁴⁻⁵ So Joseph and his fiancé, Mary, left Nazareth, a village in Galilee, and journeyed to their hometown in Judea, to the village of Bethlehem, King David's ancient home. They were required to register there, since they were both direct descendants of David.

Let me tell you a bit about **Augustus** (pic). A little before Jesus is born, Augustus wins a civil war in Asia Minor. He brings glory back to Rome. He makes Rome great again and the Romans are now in charge of a large part of the known world particularly around the Mediterranean area. He is creating a new world. And essentially he says to the weak and lowly:

“You peasants are all going to be beneficiaries of my kindness to you. I am going to build roads, give you jobs. I’m going to make sure you feel like I am a big deal and that you know it’s me who is responsible for your good fortune.”

Well, things go so well that some well to do people come to Augustus and say, “Can we worship you, as a god? We want to build temples and shrines to your greatness. Augustus says yes, but you must also worship my father – Julius Caesar, and Roma – the god of the empire.

What’s happening here is, things are being done to justify a world in which those in power stay in power, the rich keep getting richer, but the poor keep getting poorer. The slaves are kept in their proper place, while the masters freely exploit them.

This is the world into which Jesus is born.

August and his followers make claims about himself. He is being called “the savior of the world.” He is called “the one who brings in a new era of peace.” He is called “the son of the gods.” And whenever he makes a new declaration or law it is called “good news,” and the word used is a word we are familiar with – “gospel.”

Those are familiar phrases to us, aren’t they? But they are being used about Caesar Augustus. And if you would read his propaganda flyer, you might think he was the savior everyone was looking for. But what is often overlooked is the reality of life for the masses in his empire.

Typically when we read and ponder the Christmas story, we don’t want to think about the inequalities, the injustices, the exploitation, the violence, the hunger and even the despair of most people alive at the time. But Luke’s story (and even more so Matthew’s version of Christmas) shares these openly and we should not gloss over them if we want to understand the real Christmas story - what it was really like when Heaven came down to earth.

Luke continues:

[Luke 2:5](#) Mary was pregnant and nearly ready to give birth.

6-7 When they arrived in Bethlehem, Mary went into labor, and there she gave birth to her firstborn son. After wrapping the newborn baby in strips of cloth, they laid him in a feeding trough since there was no available space in any upper room in the village.

I was recently in a birthing room in one of our hospitals to see the cutest little new born baby boy. What a beautiful, clean, fresh, comfortable, welcoming environment for the little guy. Someone asked, “What would it be like to read Luke 2 in a scratch and sniff version of the bible? “They laid him in a feeding trough...scratch and sniff... eww!! Are you sure that is a good place to lay a baby?” “No but it’s the only place – there is no room for him anywhere else.”

So as Luke shares his version of the time heaven came down – Jesus’ birth – he uses language familiar to the people. (Savior, peace, good news) It was language typically being used of Augustus and now it is used of Jesus. But the setting, the circumstances, the people involved couldn’t be more of a contrast. Augustus identifies with the high and mighty, Jesus identifies with the poor and lowly.

We like the nostalgia, the goodwill, the peace and harmony. Augustus was promising this but his version of it kept those on top – on top. Those in power are kept in power. Those who are rich get richer. Those with status and privilege gain more status and privilege and are free to abuse it. While the weak, the poor, the outcast, the marginalized are left to fend for themselves and remain in their suffering.

The Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ directly confronts the Augustus’s of the world and seeks to turn the status quo upside down. It is not about being the most powerful so you can protect your own interests and desires. The good news of Christmas is not just for the privileged few – it is for everyone. Not just on a national and international scale, but even in our own communities and homes. Luke shows this by telling us who the first recipients were.

⁸ That night, in a field near Bethlehem, there were shepherds watching over their flocks. ⁹ Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared in radiant splendor before them, lighting up the field with the blazing glory of God, and the shepherds were terrified! ¹⁰

But the angel reassured them, saying, “Don’t be afraid. For I have come to bring you good news, the most joyous news the world has ever heard! And it is for everyone everywhere! ¹¹ For today in Bethlehem a rescuer (a savior) was born for you. He is the Lord, the Messiah. ¹² You will recognize him by this miracle sign: You will find a baby wrapped in strips of cloth and lying in a feeding trough!”

Even the words of the announcement of Jesus’ birth are similar to the announcement of the birth of Augustus. But it is made to people of much lower standing.

I have never gone to visit a new baby in the hospital, while I still dressed in my barn clothes without having taken a shower. And I suspect, if I did, I would not be received very well – at least get cleaned up first. But this is who is invited first to go and welcome baby Jesus. Lowly shepherds, still at work out in the field. Ordinary people. Do you see how Luke is emphasizing the humility of God, and God’s concern for the fringe people, the ones without status, the under privileged? Luke continues:

13 Then all at once, a vast number of glorious angels appeared, the very armies of heaven! And they all praised God, singing:

14 “Glory to God in the highest realms of heaven!

For there is peace and a good news given to the sons of men.”

15 When the choir of angels disappeared back to heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go! Let’s hurry and find this One that is born in Bethlehem and see for ourselves what the Lord has revealed to us.” ¹⁶ So they ran into the village and found their way to Mary and Joseph. And there was the baby, lying in a feeding trough.

17 Upon seeing this miraculous sign, the shepherds recounted what had just happened. ¹⁸ Everyone who heard the shepherds’ story was astonished by what they were told.

There is no question in the shepherds’ minds, the minds of the people who heard them, in Luke’s mind as he tells the story, and in the minds of the early Christians, that this was a

God thing. This is an event orchestrated by God himself, and he is personally involved and is at the center of the story – He is the baby in the feeding trough.

How unexpected for the Messiah to come this way – in total humility and complete vulnerability. What a contrast to Augustus who came with boasting and pride, power and force.

This is the original Christmas story.

But what does it mean? What difference does it make to us for God to come to us in this manner? Surely if he comes in such an unexpected way, will he live and act in unexpected ways?

Jesus' Unlikely Message

Mary thought about that. Luke writes:

¹⁹ Mary treasured all these things in her heart and often pondered what they meant.

I am intrigued by Mary's response. (Perhaps what Luke said about her is why we often picture Mary as a quiet, pious, thoughtful, don't make any waves type of woman.)

When he says Mary treasured all these things in her heart and often pondered what they meant – I believe it was more than just the events of Christmas Eve and Christmas day. Luke writes this after Jesus has lived and taught. After he has been crucified and risen again and returned to His Father in heaven. And Mary has been there the whole time – through it all. As his mother and now thinking about all of it. What a perspective Mary has for us.

What did Mary think about? I would like to take us back to the song Mary sang (Magnificat) before Jesus was even born. I believe it is meant to be both **reflective** – remembering how God has acted in human history. And I believe it is also meant to be somewhat **prophetic** – how God will continue to act in human history. Both help us find meaning today, as we ponder the story of a birth 2000 years ago. She begins with praise to God.

Luke 1:46-55

**'My soul magnifies the Lord,
And my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
For the Mighty One has done great things for me.**

Holy is his name.

**His mercy extends to those who fear him,
From generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
He has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones**

But has lifted up the humble.

**He has filled the hungry with good things
But has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,**

Mary seems to have known that the baby she would give birth to would disrupt the status quo of her time. As one author puts it: She imagines **“a complete reversal of human values. It is not the proud the mighty and the rich who will have the last word, it is the weak and humble. The rich will go away empty, while the hungry will be filled.**

Her son would turn human attitudes and orders of society upside down.

International teacher, Rick Markland, recently shared in his blog, **“At the intro to my child development /psych course in Zambia, I would pose the question: “If you were told that you are sick and going to die in 6 weeks. You will be healthy up to the end, though. What would you do?” The intent was to find out what were some of the things that were the most important to the students. Every year, about a third of them answered, “I would eat as much as I could.” I still quote this with tears in my eyes. I interpret it to mean that about a 1/3 of the students had never had the privilege of eating as much as they wanted to. How convicting for us when we think of our Christmas**

abundance and traditions.

The Christmas story is still about turning inequalities upside down – because they still exist.

And so in Mary's song she expresses the pain of her own situation but also of the weary world around her. But we also see that she has a fierce and tenacious faith in God and his sovereignty. Her song is an expression of the hope she had in spite of her circumstances, because she believed God would do what he said he would do – in her and through her.

So as we consider the meaning of the Christmas story, and how it will turn the world upside down. Let me suggest a few things to ponder:

1. Peace on earth and good will to all.

A group were gathered to sing Christmas carols and when they got to the carol that said "Peace on earth good will to men" one little girl interrupted her mom, "wait, just to men?" Her mom quietly tried to explain that the phrase meant 'mankind,' "humans." But still not getting it, the little girl pointed around the room to the women, asking, "what about Heather, or Jenny or you, mom and me?"

Our longing at Christmas is for peace and goodwill for **all people**. God always includes everyone – the young, the old, the rich and poor, the boys and girls, the dirty and the clean, the strangers and immigrants, as well as family and friends. **The message of Christmas is for everyone.**

Also, think about what it means to have **Christ in Us**.

Can you imagine the intimacy Mary experienced having carried baby Jesus in her womb for nine months and then watched him grow and develop. She perhaps understood the nearness of Christ in a way we may always struggle to.

But I think this is what Paul is getting at when he says, "I no longer live but Christ lives in me." Galatians 2:20. What is that really?

Teresa of Avila beautifully described this life by saying, **“Christ has no body now, but yours. No hands, no feet on earth but yours. Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks compassion into the world. Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good. Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.”**

Christmas reminds us to be Christ in the world.

It was Joseph who was told, “Name your son Jesus, because he will save the people from their sins.” Jesus means Savior. Mary sang about God My Savior. Can you picture the conversation between Mary and Joseph about their baby’s name?

What does it mean to be **Saved from Sin?**

Sin is anything that impairs, distorts or destroys life as God intended it to be. Everything that is broken about life is related in some way to sin. Whether it is people doing evil or bad things happening in the world. Heaven came down – Jesus came down to rescue us from this.

Being saved from sin is so much more than just having our bad actions forgiven. It means being rescued from evil in the world. Only God can forgive sins, but as those who carry Christ to the world, we contend for the dignity of all people. Where there is inequality, oppression, degradation, sexism, chauvinism, bigotry, poverty and brokenness ... God’s dream for people is being ravaged.

The message and mission of Jesus is life and life abundant. It is not about nostalgia. It’s for every human soul to be free and flourishing. This is the call and passion of anyone who follows Jesus.

The provocative message in the song of Mary continues to disrupt our world today. The coming of the kingdom of Heaven at Christmas should still bring about a political and social and personal revolution. If we believe Mary’s words to be true, then there is great hope, especially in the darkest corners of our world. A new world was being birthed then and continues to be birthed to this day, by the God who gives life because he loves us so much.

PRAY – let us remember this together as we light the advent candles.

Fourth Sunday (purple candle – LOVE & the Christ candle (white) - PURITY)

As we light our advent candle

We thank you for the love you give.

As we prepare for Christmas time

Light of the world, shine on us.

As we seek to worship you

Shed love in our hearts.

To all the people who don't know you,

Light of the world, shine through us.

In this world of pain and darkness,

Help us to share your love.

As we go out from here today,

Light of the world, light the way.