

“Signs of Christ’s Coming: A Place for the Treasure Is Found”

Dear Friends, Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus. Today we come to the close of a series designed to get us thinking about (and ready for) the coming of Christ. It’s one that deals with some of the signs, things we can see that remind us that the coming of Christ is near.

Two weeks ago it was the story of a fig tree sprouting leaves, pointing to that day when Jesus will (once again) return. When the leaves begin to appear (Jesus said), you know that spring is soon to come. When these signs begin to take place, that’s when you’ll know that it’s soon to happen.

Last week it was the story of John the Baptist, the voice of one crying in the wilderness. When you hear his voice, you know the time is getting close. When you hear what (God is saying) through him (to you), you know it’s time (in your life) to change.

Today’s it’s the story of the angel, Gabriel, his appearance to Mary, the message that she was chosen (by God) to give birth to his Son, and a sure and certain sign that the promised Savior of the world was soon to be born.

When I was a child, there was a game we played that would help pass the time, especially on rainy days like today. It was an imagination game, and if it had a name, which I don't think it did, it might have been called “Where Would You Leave the Treasure?”

The idea was simple. Pretend you had a treasure - something valuable, a large amount of money, it didn’t matter. It was yours, (it belonged to you), but something came up. You couldn’t take care of it yourself, so you had to give it someone else to take care of.

In the game, (at least how we played it) the bank was not an option. You couldn’t put it there for safekeeping. In the same way, you couldn’t bury it until things changed. (That wasn’t a choice, either.) You had to leave it with someone else, another person you could trust. The fun of the game, of course, was sitting around and exploring all the possibilities, and all the reasons why (or why not) you would end up choosing the person you did.

Someone would say, “How about leaving it with the school principal?” (The response would be), “That wouldn’t work. She’d probably spend it on books.” (Someone else would say), “Then, what about leaving it with the preacher (at the church)?” “Too risky, (they’d say); “he end up putting it in the offering.” “Okay, then, well why not leave it with your sister?” “Are you kidding” (would be the response)? She’d want to keep (at least half of it) for herself.”

And on and on it would go, the search for just the right person to keep the treasure. In the mind of a child, the stakes were high. Your whole treasure risked on something as fragile as the trustworthiness of another human being.

Now, I don’t want to put too much of that game on what we find in the stories leading up to Christmas, the verses (in particular) we read this morning, but I can’t help wonder if that’s not what Luke was thinking about when he wrote what he did; and (in the same way) if that’s not what God (actually did) when he considered where and when and (with whom) he would entrust the treasure that was his. God was looking for just the right time, just the right setting, and just the right person (or persons) to pass on what he had to share.

In God’s case, the treasure was not gold, but the gospel. The treasure was not silver, but the good news of a Son. It was not cold, hard cash, but the deep, rich promise that, when all is said and done, we are not alone, that God is finally “with us,” at work in our world to make things right.

Where in the world would you leave a treasure like that; one more fragile than silver and, yet, infinitely more valuable? One that could so easily be squandered, casually dismissed, self-servingly rationalized, or (maybe even) put to death. Where would you leave that kind of treasure, so that it would be preserved and cherished and ultimately passed on?

“Signs of Christ’s Coming.” That’s what’s happening in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. It’s one of the signs that the coming of Christ is near. The Bible says God’s ways are not our ways. God’s way of thinking

and acting are different from ours. It's in the places where it's least expected, that's where you'll often find it. It's in and through the people you might never consider, that's where God (most often) chooses to show up.

Look (for a moment) at how Luke tells the story. (We didn't read the entire chapter, but it's certainly there.) In the beginning of chapter one (he says), "In the days of Herod, king of Judea..." It's almost as if he's saying, "Now there's a possibility! There's an option for where to leave the treasure. How about leaving it with a King?"

That's an interesting thought. God could have done that, if he chose. He could have left (what he had to give) with the Herods of this world, with those in political control. After all, they are ones who collect the taxes and pave the roads. They build the schools and pass the laws. They're the ones who command the armies and provide for the care of the weak. God could have (easily) left his treasure with them.

And, in some ways, it would have made good sense, because God's message (if you think about it) is as political as it gets. The treasure is the news that God is at work in the world to pull tyrants off their thrones and to lift up those who hunger and thirst for what's fair and right. God's is a message that when even a single child dies from hunger, that there's something in the heart of God that dies, as well.

That's the kind of God we have. God is at work (in this world) to break political deadlock, to fill the bowls (of his children) with food, and to send the greedy empty away. When the Bible tells us that "every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low," it's not talking about changing the landscape of the land. It's talking about changing the political landscape; about making right (in this world) the things in this world that are not.

God could have entrusted his treasure to the Herods of the world. But that's not what he did, because the gospel is the news that if there is to be justice in the world, there can only be one true King. If there is to be peace in the world, there can only be one true Ruler. If ever there is to be obedience and allegiance to the one in control, there can only be one true Lord...and his name is not Herod.

Every year at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, there is displayed, beneath a large Christmas tree, a beautiful eighteenth century nativity scene. In (some of the) more obvious ways, it's a very familiar scene. The usual characters are all there: shepherds awakened by the voices of angels; wise men from the East who came seeking to find the Christ; Joseph, Mary, the little baby; a few sheep and donkeys and goats; they're all there; every last one.

What's different about this scene, however, and what makes it stand out, is that the stable, and the shepherds, and the cradle are all set, not in the expected small town of Bethlehem, but among the ruins of the mighty Roman world. The fragile manger (holding the Christ-child) is surrounded (in this nativity) by broken and decaying columns from Roman cities. The artists (who put this all together) knew exactly what they were doing, the meaning of the treasure; because the gospel, the birth of God's new age, was also designed to bring death to the old.

You can't have it both ways; neither in the political landscape or the landscape of your own life. All of the so-called Herods of this world, (wherever they're found) know (deep down) that if God is in control, then they're not. If this world belongs to him, then it no longer belongs to them. And that's why, throughout the entire story, (starting with Christmas), they seek to crush it and do away with it, because (to them), the gospel is news too bad to be shared.

"Signs of Christ's Coming." God's ways are not our ways. God's ways of thinking and acting are so much different from ours. Look at what happens next. Luke says, "In the days of Herod...there was a priest named Zechariah..."

Now, there's another possibility for God. His was a much different story from Herod's. Zechariah was a man of faith, a man of God, a man who had committed his life to being a priest. God could have left his treasure with him.

Again, after all, the treasure (just as it was political) was also, theological. It was God who made us, and we are his. It was God who set this world into motion, and still does. God is the one who gives us hope. God is the one who makes it possible to have peace. God creates and sustains and gives life. This was God's Son to be born; God's gift to the entire world. God is the only one who can save us, and he did. Why not leave it with those who understand God, whose job it is to point us to what's holy?

Now, (as we've said), we didn't read the entire story, but do you remember what happened? Zechariah was in the temple. It was his turn to be in charge. While he was there, an angel appears and tells him that he (and his wife, Elizabeth) are going to have a son.

Now, that was good news. If you remember the story, Elizabeth had been barren all these years, and (after all these years), he and she were no longer young. When the angel came and announced what was to happen, it was hard for Zechariah to believe. And so, (as a result), until their son was born, Zechariah was unable to speak.

Now, again, I don't want to read too much into this story and draw conclusions that are not there; nor do I want to give you the wrong impression. God wants us (without question) to be connected with him (each day), just like Zechariah. There's nothing (in this life) he wants more.

At the same time, it is possible (like Zechariah) to be so familiar with things that are holy that you miss the holiness of what God is doing. For Herod, the gospel was news too bad to be endured, and it had to come to an end. For Zechariah, it was too amazing to be believed, and he didn't even know where to start.

Don't ever let the fact that you can't figure it all out, stand in the way of your believing that God has already figured it out. Don't ever let the fact that what (to you), in your life, seems impossible is not only possible, but maybe even probably with God.

There's a story told about a seminary student, studying under the theologian Paul Tillich. Tillich had just finished lecturing on the authority of God's Word and of how the authority (of God's Word) goes far beyond its actual words.

One of the students had a hard time being convinced, and so he stood up (in the middle of the lecture) and held up a Bible in his hand. He said, "Are you telling me this is not the Word of God?" "Are you saying that this is not (in itself) all we need?"

Tillich looked at the student's hand tightly gripping the book. He said, "It's not the Word of God (all you need), if you think you can grasp it. It's only the Word of God (everything you need) when it begins to grasp you."

I like that. There's truth to what Tillich said. It's possible that an over-familiarity with things holy can, ironically, (just as it did with Zechariah) make us numb to what truly is holy in our lives. God shows up when we least expect it, reveals himself in ways we might (otherwise) not ever see.

"Signs of Christ's Coming." God did not leave his treasure with the Herods; he knew they would crush it. God did not leave his treasure with the Zechariahs; he knew they would have a hard time believing it was true. Where he left it was where no one would expect. Where he placed it was in the weakest of all places, the least likely of all spots -- the virgin womb of a young Jewish girl.

Luke tells us that the first time the gospel message is found on human lips, it is not in the Roman Senate or in the Holy of Holies. It's not in the courthouse or in the Temple. It's in a place the world would count for nothing: in a conversation between two women, Mary and Elizabeth, each one facing their own pregnancies. In a conversation (most likely) about stretch marks and swollen ankles, and how neither could believe what was happening. It's there that the good news of God's treasure was first shared.

Just think about it. For Herod, the news was too bad to be endured. (It had to come to an end.) For Zechariah, the news was too amazing to be believed. (He didn't know what to do.) But for Mary, too unimportant (in the eyes of the world) to be counted, it was news "too good not to be true."

It's in our places of weakness that we are most often (the most open) to the intrusion of God's presence. That's where God chooses to leave his treasure.

He doesn't leave it with us when we're confident in ourselves, somehow convinced that we have (in ourselves) all we need. No, instead, he leaves his treasure with us when we're broken and when we realize (and accept) the fact that we'll never make it on our own.

God doesn't come to us when we brush aside all who threaten our status, all who bore us (or bother us) with their own worries and wants. No, he comes to us in those moments when we move beyond our self-centered way of life, long enough to get a glimpse of the needs of others and to feel those needs deeply enough to hunger and thirst for God to make it right.

Let me close with this. On the wall of the museum of the concentration camp at Dachau is a moving photograph of a mother and her little girl being taken to a gas chamber at Auschwitz. (Some of you may have

seen it.) The girl, who is walking in front of her mother, has no idea where she is going. The mother, who walks behind her, unfortunately does, but there is nothing she can do to stop it.

In her helplessness, she performs the only act of love she has left. She places her hand over her little girl's eyes so she will not have to see the horror which lies ahead. I can only imagine the prayers that must have filled that mother's heart. "O God, don't let this be all there is. Somehow, somewhere, make things right."

Luke's word to us today is that God hears those prayers and responds to those needs. It is into just such situations of hopelessness and helplessness that the power of God is born in this world. It's there that God entrusts the treasure, lifting up the lowly and filling the hungry with good things – finally and forever setting things right.

On a dark night in a cattle stall in Bethlehem, the treasure which was entrusted to Mary became the treasure for us all. All the Herods and all the priests and all the powers-that-be gathered together to do their worst. But on Christmas morning, just as Mary said, "God stretched out his mighty arm and gave us his best."

My friends, God's ways are not our ways. His way of thinking and acting is so much different than ours. That's the good news. "Signs of Christ's Coming." You just might be surprised where he shows up next. Let's pray.

Gracious God, We give you thanks for the gift of your Son and for the places in which you have chosen to reveal yourself to us. We thank you for these weeks leading up to Christmas and for the chance we have to hear your Word and to be strengthened in our faith.

Help us to always keep our eyes open, watching for those places where you are at work, waiting for those times when you choose to show up, and wanting, desperately wanting for your will to be done. Give us hearts like the heart of Jesus, that what moves you to action might also move us. In his name we pray. Amen.