

This Sunday's texts:

Isaiah 9:6-6

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-7

God with Us

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The story of the birth of Jesus from the Gospel of Luke:

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests." When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

I read recently about a church in San Francisco. They had set up a nativity scene in the lobby area of their church and on the day after Christmas, the pastor was walking around and making sure everything was okay. The first lap through is all

good, but as he came back around to the lobby for the second time, he noticed that the baby Jesus was missing from the manger. Now he had been there just a few minutes earlier, so he quickly walked outside and looked up and down the street. He saw a little boy pulling his wagon. So he decided to catch up with him and he looked down and, sure enough, there was the baby Jesus in the wagon. So he said to the little boy, "Where did you get your passenger, my friend?" and the little boy said, "At the church." He said, "Well, why did you take him?" He said, "Well, I was at church two days ago and I prayed to the little Lord Jesus that I could get a wagon for Christmas and I told Him if I got a wagon, I would come and take him for a ride around the block in my wagon." This perspective of children can often open our eyes to new elements of the Christmas story and sometimes, in our own pessimism, we might think he was trying to steal the baby Jesus, but he was just trying to honor the promise, the prayer he had made to God.

Often, we hear these examples of children and one of them comes from *The Greatest Christmas Pageant Ever*. It was written by Barbara Robinson. This Christmas Pageant was being put on by the children of a church, but it took a different twist this year when the Herdman children got involved. The Herdman children were not frequent attendees of the church. In fact, they had only started coming on Sundays a month before Christmas. It only happened because the older Erdman boy heard some others talking and learned that they serve cookies and hot chocolate at Sunday school, so he came with his brothers and sisters. It just so happened that first Sunday there not only did they get hot chocolate and cookies, but they also were invited to be a part of the Christmas Pageant. Now, the Herdman kids, let's just say they were mean. They were tough streetwise kids. They have never heard the Christmas story before, but they ended up getting all the main roles in this Christmas Pageant. Do you know why? Because none of the other kids would try out for the parts if a Herdman boy or girl tried out for it. So they got all the main parts, including Leroy. Now Leroy was deemed as slow and he was given the part of the innkeeper. Maybe not too difficult, the innkeeper had to deliver just one line in the Christmas Pageant. That one line was this, "I'm sorry. We have no room." Well, he had trouble with this all throughout the rehearsals, but on the night of the play, he got it right. But something happened in Leroy's mind. In Leroy's mind, this wasn't just a play and these weren't his brothers and sisters acting in a play. It was real. With Mary and Joseph coming to an inn, he just felt sorry for them that there was no room. Well, he delivered his line. He said it exactly the way he was supposed to. "I'm sorry. We have no room" and then he added his own line, "But you can come stay in my room." Some of

the audience considered this the greatest Christmas pageant ever because Leroy understood how important Jesus really is and that we can invite him in. As we think about the Christmas story this Christmas, I hope we too can think about how we can welcome Jesus in

Now I've asked my son, Paul to sing this first song as the way to communicate the heart of what God is trying to do for us. [Paul Cords sings "God With Us."]

The story of Christmas is a redemption story. It's a story that actually begins early in the Book of Genesis when God's response to sin of humanity is to begin the process of redeeming the world and that culminates in the coming of Jesus. Christmas is a wonderful time to celebrate. The carols are wonderful. The lights, the decorations, the gift exchange, the families together, the wonderful foods. It's a great time to celebrate, but let's remember what it's all about. God seeks to redeem us, to bless us, to come into our lives. Many of the words of the song that Paul just sang touch on those stories. He comes to bring peace. We talked in the Advent season about peace coming from the word *shalom*. It's a completeness. It's a wholeness. Brothers and sisters in Christ, we need that gift from God. When we feel like we're lacking anything, especially as it relates to God's relationship with us, God's thinking about us, we can know that in Christmas, in the coming of Jesus, everything we need to be right with God is given to us as a gift and we're invited to welcome him in.

I love the fact that in both Greek and Hebrew the word for "spirit" is the same as the word for "breath" and "wind." A part of this breathing life into us, this being born anew that is offered to us in Christ is, in fact, Jesus giving his people the Holy Spirit, so that we don't just get to hang out with God once in a while, when we come to church, but He is with us every moment of every day, residing in us. This innkeeper story, I love the fact that Shelly chose that and I love the way she moved toward the end of that story because she suggested that should she have been the innkeeper, not that her inn would not have been full, but said she would have simply given up her room for Mary and Joseph, to give birth to Jesus and she would have stayed in the stable. Brothers and sisters in Christ, as we celebrate Christmas, we still want to ask that question. Is there room in our lives to welcome Jesus in? Do we feel like we've got everything we need? We're just busy. We don't have room for anything else, this being a busy season, life always having challenges.

So what is it that this presence of God, this life Jesus offers us to enter into with Him, that He comes and enters into with us? What is it about? He promises,

we hear in this psalm, strength. Psalm 118 says “The Lord is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation.”¹ Isaiah said, “Surely God is my salvation; I will trust and not be afraid. The Lord, the Lord Himself, is my strength and my defense; He has become my salvation.”² As we welcome Jesus into the inn of our hearts, as we trust Him in every circumstance of our lives, even as we experience the challenges and the struggles and the uncertainty, we welcome in His strength. He will bring that into us. He will bring, not *our* strength, but *His* strength into our lives, as we put our trust in Him and He leads us through, often through the love and care of the family of God.

God is faithful. This promise that He kept in sending His Son is the same promise He will keep for us each and every day. So as we celebrate this Christmas, let us think of it as a new beginning, as God will show up for us each and every day and give us strength. Christmas is a celebration of God keeping his promises. Isaiah 7 said, “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son and we will call him [‘God with us.’ We will call him] Immanuel.”³

This forgiveness that is promised in Christ, the forgiveness that comes to us because we've all sinned, the forgiveness that comes to us because Jesus died in our place is not the whole story. It's a *big* part of the story, but the rest of the story is once now we are forgiven, we're invited on this journey with God, as He lives with us and in us in our lives. As we celebrate the peace and the strength and the love and the life that He offers us in Jesus, we simply welcome Him in and put our trust in Him. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a Son and call Him Immanuel.

Children of God, Jesus is Lord and Savior. God is with you this day and every day to come. Allow Him to open your heart and open your eyes to see that strength and peace and power at work in your heart, so that you can be filled with the hope that is born in us. Galatians 4 says this, “But when the set time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption,”⁴ becoming children of God ourselves. 1 Peter says this, “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In His great mercy, He has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”⁵ That is the hope and joy that this

¹ Psalm 118:14

² Isaiah 12:2

³ Isaiah 7:14

⁴ Galatians 4:4

⁵ 1 Peter 1:3

Christmas story, this turning of history that happened some two thousand years ago, that is offered to us in the reality of each and every day that we celebrate on this Christmas.

And that's not all. He indeed is Savior! Listen to Titus, "But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, He saved us ... He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by His grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life."⁶

Well, that's usually what we hear in the Christmas message, in the Christian message, this hope of the Gospel that Jesus has come to forgive us our sins and grant us eternal life with Him. But I want to suggest that God With Us gives us a great opportunity for something even stronger, even greater. Together with that forgiveness, together with that eternity, He invites us to be the ambassadors, to be those who go and tell the story. We not only get to receive this for ourselves, but we get to be the hands and feet of God, to bring the hope of Jesus to a world that may not know Him, to the Herdman family, who hadn't heard the Christmas story and yet, somehow, like Leroy, grasp the reality - there's room in my life for Jesus. I want to welcome Him in. So brothers and sisters in Christ, this Christmas, not only let us receive this message of hope and love.

I was at a conference. I'd already been a pastor for quite a while I'm sad to admit and someone said this to me. He said God can never love you more than He does right now. He already fully loves you. No matter what you do, good or bad, you're not going to cause Him to love you any more because He already loves you fully. Let God embrace you with that love. Let Him live in your heart and transform with that love. And then, enjoy the wonderful opportunity to go and tell others that He loves them that much too. Go and tell it on the mountains.

⁶ Titus 3:4-7