

“Good News of Great Joy”

Valley Presbyterian Church – December 24, 2008

Christmas Eve

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One of the statistics you often hear reported around Christmas is the number of people who are traveling in order to be “home for the holidays.” This year, even though the numbers have fallen from previous years, there will be over 8 million flying by plane, another 3 million by train or bus and over 60 million going by car. The winter storms have, of course, delayed or changed some travelers plans, but this will still rank as one of the most heavily traveled weeks in the whole year. People naturally want to gather with their loved ones at Christmas: to share meals, to exchange gifts, to make memories, and to renew traditions.

A part of what makes the story of the nativity so striking – even though we have heard it so many times – is the theme of dislocation. Mary and Joseph are called to travel away from their home, even though she is “great with child.” Because of the census, the town of Bethlehem is over-crowded; there is nowhere available for them to make even a temporary home. The shepherds, watching their flocks at night, are told by the angels to go – to travel into town and find baby Jesus so they might worship him. Even God’s Son has left his place alongside the Father to come and be born in this out-of-the-way place. None of these characters in the story: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the shepherds; none of them were at home, and yet they made it a home. The parents care for the child as if they are in the maternity ward of the local hospital. The shepherds visiting the manger, sharing the stories of what they had seen and heard; that the angels had appeared to announce his birth; that they were told to go and find the child, told how they could locate him. Not at his home, but what had been made into a home.

Whenever and wherever nativity scenes are enacted – whether on the mantle at home with carved wooden figures or on church lawns with live participants – in each of these nativity scenes, it is the baby that is in the center. All of the eyes – from the loving parents to the resting animals to the visiting shepherds to the arriving magi – every eye is focused on the Christ child. All of the traveling, changes of plans and dislocations seem to have been forgotten. Instead of being home in Nazareth, they are now miles and miles away in the town of Bethlehem. Instead of a comfortable room at the inn, they are in a stable out back. Instead of their closest friends and family by their side, there are animals and shepherds who smelled like the animals.

Why is that okay with them? Why do Mary and Joseph seem to handle it all so gracefully? Well, for one thing, they have been told by the angels who this baby will be. Emmanuel: God with us. The promise which had been made to them has now come to its fulfillment. The child has been born. And it was not their doing, but a gift from God. At first, this announcement may have seemed like a curse of God – Mary, frightened by her future but ready to be a servant of the Lord; engaged but not yet married, showing up at Joseph’s door already pregnant. Joseph, having every right to call off the marriage and

expose Mary's pregnancy, chooses to do the more honorable thing, trusting in her and in God who makes all things possible. God has already been working in and through them to make possible the miraculous birth of a child – a gift they did nothing to earn or deserve.

At our best, we also make the Christ child the center of our Christmas gatherings. At our homes, or with our family and friends, we at times pause from the food and gifts; the music and decorations; the travel and travel delays; to truly see that God has blessed the world with salvation. This is the Good News of great joy that the angels proclaimed; not that everything would be easy, not that it would always turn out the way that we had planned, but that God would be in our midst: around us, among us and within us. When we gather for Christmas, we realize that God rests not only in the center, but also on the edges – that God knows which of us fears losing their job, or is fighting depression, or is struggling to heal a relationship. God knows all of this because God's Son came to live among us. In Christ, God walked among us, and experienced both joy and pain with us.

As much as we might imagine the figures in the nativity scene fixing their gaze on the baby lying in center, their eyes must have also wandered to see one another: some of them family, some of them friends or fellow-laborers, some utter strangers. We imagine that they must have also looked at their surroundings: the hay, the animals, the stars, the dark night air. What had brought them there – to that out-of-the-way place on that night? It could have only been Gods' leading. Of all the possible characters, scripts and settings, God had chosen this one for them. They were to be actors and witnesses to this particular drama – this in-breaking of the Good News of great joy that God had been planning and preparing for all of creation; and now the time had come.

How can we enter and become participants in this drama? How can we proclaim the Good News of great joy? How can we handle the adversity and uncertainty of life as gracefully as did the Mother and Father of our Lord Jesus? How can we share the peace and love of Christ when your brother has lost his job; or when your mother is afflicted with dementia; or when you can't or won't be home for Christmas?

We do it by remembering that the Good News of Christ's birth is just that: it is news; it takes us by surprise; it alters our perspective; it changes our way of thinking. With Christ in our midst, we can look in the eyes of family and friends with a new sense of care and compassion. With Christ around us, we view strangers in a whole new light; not as a threat, not as different, but as fellow sons and daughters of God. With the Good News, we are reminded that home is not just where you live, or where you once lived, but where life has been given to you. What better image than that of an infant child, sleeping peacefully in a manger, surrounded by animals and shepherds and visitors from the east to show how precious life is? A new birth; new possibilities and yet new responsibilities as well. A gift; wonderfully surprising and yet completely unmerited.

As the angels from on high sang it to the shepherds, let us also proclaim it to and for one another. "I bring you good news of great joy for all people...Glory to God in the highest heaven." AMEN.