

Advent 2014

We have come to the last Sunday of Advent as anticipation of Christmas builds in our hearts and homes. The birth of a baby is always good news. It always brings joy to a family. But the birth of Jesus brought joy not just to one family but to every family. Christ the Savior is born. Christ our Savior is born. In the darkness of our existence comes the light of the world.

The angel declared to the shepherds, "I bring you good tidings of great joy which shall be to all the people, for unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord." In anticipation of the great joy that comes with the birth of our redeemer, we light this fourth candle of Advent. Now hear the great promise of God's word as we read responsively this morning from Isaiah 59 and 60.

Reader: Surely the arm of the Lord is not too short to save, nor his ear too dull to hear. But your iniquities have separated you from your God; your sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear.

Congregation: The Redeemer will come to Zion, to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares the Lord.

Reader: Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

Congregation: See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn. Lift up your eyes and look about you....

Reader: I will make peace your governor and righteousness your ruler. No longer will violence be heard in your land, nor ruin or destruction within your borders, but you will call your walls Salvation and your gates Praise.

Congregation: The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light and your days of sorrow will end.

O Lord, we rise in praise and adoration this morning, rejoicing in anticipation of the coming of our redeemer. We acknowledge today that you alone are able to redeem us from sin. You alone are mighty to save. With gratitude we humbly bow in worship and adoration to you, our Savior and Redeemer, Prince of Peace and soon coming King. May our hearts once again be drawn closer and closer to you in surrender and in love. May we delight ourselves in the glory of your presence and grace today. Alleluia. Christ is born. Alleluia. Christ has come to seek and save. Alleluia. Christ has redeemed us from the curse and set us free. Alleluia. Christ is coming

again. Alleluia and Amen.

We Believe Part 9

We have spent this Advent season rightly focused upon Jesus. We talked about why we believe he is who we say he is. We talked about why he had to be fully God and fully man in order to save us from our sins. Last Sunday we talked about Jesus as the ultimate prophet, priest and king. This morning I want to focus once again on who Jesus is and how we view him.

Some may recall a quote from the late Richard John Neuhaus that I shared a couple of years ago at Advent. He wrote, **“Disguise is central to God’s way of dealing with us human beings. Not because God is playing games with us but because the God who is beyond our knowing makes himself known in the disguise of what we can know. The Christian word for this is revelation and the ultimate revelation came by incarnation. Who would have thought that the baby nursing at Mary’s breast is, in truth, the Creator of heaven and earth? Who would have thought that the baby, now a young man, stretched in tortured death upon the cross is, in truth, the King of kings and Lord of lords? Yet some then, and millions upon millions since then, have thought exactly that. God is a master of disguises, in order that we might see. God who is the fullness of Being infiltrated our world of beings in order that we might fully be. Christmas is about incarnation and incarnation is God’s becoming what he is not, in order that we might become what he is. Thus does God reveal himself.”** Richard John Neuhaus

God revealing himself, making himself known in the disguise of what we can know. So John’s gospel says he became flesh and dwelt among us and we beheld him. We saw him, heard him, touched him, met him, experienced him, God coming to us so we could know him and have salvation and the life he offers to us.

As I thought about this service, I kept thinking of how Jesus came to us disguised in flesh, disguised in what we can know and then how we perceive him. How do we see him and what is our response to him? Think about the response of some of those in the Christmas story. Take Herod and the Magi for instance. Look at Matthew 2. **“After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, ‘Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.’”** Matthew 2:1-2

The Magi or wisemen were perhaps astrologers and astronomers. They may have studied the stars and planets from a scientific standpoint, but it seems they also believed the arrangement

of the stars influenced human history and could predict the future. **The Magi saw Jesus as a phenomenon.** They saw a unique star, a sign in the heavens and set out to pursue the sign believing it announced the birth or the coming of a king. The star pointed to something or someone extraordinary, something worth studying and examining. They came to worship, to show honor and respect to one they believed to be newborn royalty.

The Magi remind me of a lot of people today who view Jesus as a topic to be studied, a figure in history to be examined. They may see him as a means to making money, a marketing tool to be used to sell “Christian products”, but they haven’t viewed him as the one who has come to save them from their sins and change their life forever. They don’t view him as God incarnate, God in flesh. They don’t know him as Savior and Lord and unless you’ve seen him as Savior, you haven’t really seen him at all.

The Magi went to Jerusalem thinking that would be where a future king of the Jews would be born. Instead of finding a new born king, they found a wicked, paranoid king. Herod the Great was a brutal ruler who killed anyone he thought to be a threat to his throne and power, including wives, his own children and other family members. Even from his death bed he ordered one son to be killed. He was not a nice man. **Herod saw Jesus as a threat.** Herod told the Magi to let him know if they found the new born king so he could come and worship as well. The wise men indeed found Jesus and Mary and Joseph. The bible says they were overjoyed. They presented him with gifts and bowed down and worshiped him. Being warned by God in a dream, they didn’t go back to tell Herod and instead returned home by a different route.

Think about it. The Magi were pagan astrologers. They weren’t Jews, they likely weren’t really even God seekers, and yet God in mercy revealed himself to them, making himself known to them by what they knew, by what they could understand, revealing himself and his sign to them in the heavens. It reminds us of how much God wants us to know him, that he would even reveal himself to pagan wisemen from the east by means of a star. The bible says the heavens declare the glory of God and it was the heavens that brought the Magi to Bethlehem where they encountered the King of kings. I have to believe the Magi were changed by what they saw. From viewing a phenomenon in the heavens to viewing the Maker of the heavens born of a virgin and lying in a manger.

When the Magi failed to return to Herod, he knew he had been outsmarted. The bible says **“When Herod realized he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” Matthew 2:16**

Herod was threatened by Jesus' birth. He thought he was a rival to the throne. Herod didn't understand that Jesus hadn't come to rule over a nation. It wasn't Herod's kingdom Jesus desired to rule over. Jesus wanted to rule and reign in Herod's heart and life and that was an even greater threat.

Herod was used to being the lord of his own life, just like most of us. He was used to doing just what he wanted to do, when he wanted to do it. Jesus came to save Herod and all of us from sin and self-destruction. Our human nature wants to do as we please and satisfy ourselves any way we choose. The problem is the way of our choosing is destructive to self and to others. Just like Herod, we don't wish to surrender control to anyone else, including Jesus. The truth is, we desperately need Jesus. We need him to be Savior and Lord of our lives, to direct us and show us how to live. On our own, we won't do any better than Herod. He thought he had control but at the end of his life he died painfully, fearfully, hated by everyone and mourned by no one. All his wealth and power and control couldn't buy his way out of hell and into heaven. Herod saw Jesus as a threat instead of seeing him as a Savior and king to be trusted.

The Magi saw Jesus as a phenomenon, Herod saw him as a threat. **The citizens of Bethlehem didn't see Jesus at all.** The good citizens were preoccupied with everything else, everyday life. The inn keeper couldn't be expected to pay much attention to another pregnant woman. "Just what we need around here, more crying babies and more hungry mouths to feed."

John wrote, **"He was in the world and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. He came to that which was his own but his own did not receive him." John 1:10-11.** His own did not receive him. "Hey, Bethlehem, the Son of God is born in your town and you're ignoring him!" But we can't blame them really. We do the same thing. We ignore Jesus and we know who he is. Bethlehem and the inn keeper didn't! We focus our time and attention on our self. We ignore God's plan and his will for our lives. Most folks pretty much go through life and leave God out of the equation. We don't obey him or live for him. For weddings and funerals we call a preacher and give God a quick acknowledgment before we go right back to our own way. In a time of crisis, we pray and promise, but as soon as things get back to normal, we really don't have time for God, unless of course we decide to blame Him for something for which we were responsible anyway. Like the good citizens of Bethlehem, we can't be bothered with God or a Savior. We ignore the essential and eternal and spend our lives fixated on the trivial and temporary. Jesus left the glory of heaven and came to earth to be born as the sacrifice that would take away our sins by his death upon the cross. How can we ignore him and live our lives as if Jesus and his dying for us doesn't matter? How can we live as if eternity

in heaven or hell doesn't matter? It matters how we view Jesus. See him as a phenomenon, see him as a threat to the control of our life, ignore him and refuse to see him at all, or see him as the shepherds did.

Remember the shepherds? **The shepherds saw Jesus as the Lamb of God.** Luke 2 tells their story. These were rough guys, spending their lives outdoors in the elements caring for their sheep. They weren't exactly welcomed everywhere they went. It was to the shepherds the angel appeared on that holy night to announce the birth of the Savior. **“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 of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you; You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger....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.’...So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph and the baby, who was lying in the manger.”** Luke 2:9-16

The shepherds were the kind of folks who could really use some good news. Imagine when the angels told them the Savior had been born— “to you”. To you! How amazing is this! These men who were on the fringes of society are now being told a Savior has been born to you, and he is Christ the Lord, the Messiah. Come and see! A Savior for them. No one would care about saving shepherds, but a Savior had been born for them! Come and see your Savior. “We aren't exactly dressed right for viewing babies, let alone a baby as special as the Messiah. Are you sure we would be welcomed?” Imagine what they thought when the angel said, “you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” “Wrapped in swaddling clothes? Hey, that's how we wrap our babies at birth.” And lying in a feeding trough? A manger? How appropriate for shepherds. This Savior they could relate to; this they could understand. So they hurried off to see all that had been told to them.

Remember Neuhaus' statement, that “God who is beyond our knowing makes himself known in the disguise of what we can know.” The birth of the One who will be known as the Lamb of God, the sinless sacrifice given to atone for our sins, is announced to who else but shepherds. The Lamb of God is lying in a manger, guarded and watched over by shepherds. God, making himself known to them in the disguise of what they can know. God, revealing himself to the Magi, the astronomers, through what they can know, through the stars of the heavens. He is still revealing himself to us today in ways we can understand because he wants us to know him and his salvation. We need to respond as the shepherds did – “Let's go to Bethlehem

and see...” Come and see. Come behold the lamb of God that takes away your sin by his great sacrifice.

All of these folks saw Jesus and viewed him in different ways. But there was one who saw him as no other did or ever could. **Mary saw him as her baby boy.** Can you imagine all that was going through her mind and her heart from the time the angel Gabriel appeared to her in Nazareth to this moment in a stable in Bethlehem? What could it all mean? What did it all mean? Luke summed it up like this: **“But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.” Luke 2:19.** For Mary, regardless of what the angel had said, regardless of the story the shepherds told of a heavenly host, regardless of the gifts brought by the Magi, when it all came down to it, this was her baby boy. In that moment I don’t think she was thinking about kings or the Son of David or the Son of the Most High or what it would mean that he would be prophet and priest and king. In that moment, it was just mother and child. It was just her baby boy. How exhausting, how frightening, how marvelous, how beautiful, how gracious. The angel said to name him Jesus. Baby Jesus. Her son. This was her baby boy.

Can you see her holding her baby boy? Quieting him gently against the strange sounds of the stable that night. In his book *God Came Near*, Max Lucado wrote, “Wide awake is Mary. My, how young she looks! Her heads rests on the soft leather of Joseph’s saddle. The pain has been eclipsed by wonder. She looks into the face of the baby. Her son. Her Lord. His Majesty. At this point in history, the human being who best understands who God is and what he is doing is a teenage girl in a smelly stable. She can’t take her eyes off him. Somehow Mary knows she is holding God. *So this is he.* She remembers the words of the angel. ‘His kingdom will never end.’ He looks like anything but a king. His face is prunish and red. His cry, though strong and healthy, is still the helpless and piercing cry of a baby. And he is absolutely dependent upon Mary for his well being. Majesty in the midst of the mundane. Holiness in the filth of sheep manure and sweat. Divinity entering the world on the floor of a stable, through the womb of a teenager and in the presence of a carpenter. She touches the face of the infant-God. *How long was your journey!*”

“This, this is Christ the king, whom shepherds guard and angels sing, haste, haste to bring him laude, the babe the son of Mary.”

We’ve looked at these views but when it comes down to it, what matters most is how you view him. Just think, Jesus came all the way from heaven to earth to find us, to reveal himself to us in a way we can understand. He went all the way to the east and placed a star in the heavens to call the Magi to himself. He sent angels to the shepherds’ field outside Bethlehem to call them to

come and see. He wanted them to see the Lamb of God that would take away their sin and the sins of the world.

And for me, he came all the way to Muskogee, Oklahoma, to a children's Sunday School classroom down in the basement of the old First Assembly of God, and to a seat turned into an altar where I surrendered my heart and life to Jesus Christ. How do I see him after all these years? I see him as I did so long ago, as Savior and Lord, as Redeemer and friend. As the faithful One who has never left me, never forsaken me. The one who has been gracious to me and forgiven my sins though I've failed him time and time again. He is the one who has called me, pardoned, redeemed, justified and sanctified me. He is the one who has held me when I needed comfort, the one who healed me when I was sick and dying, the one who lifted me up when I was sinking in depression and despair. He is the one who carries me through my grief and loss, who gives me hope and covers me with his mercy and love. He is my all sufficient Lord and Savior. Everything I have need of I find in Him. Mary's baby boy is my all sufficient Lord and King. I can say there is no other like Jesus.

The songwriter wrote,
I would love to tell you what I think of Jesus,
How I found in him a friend so kind and true.
I would tell you how he changed my life completely,
He did something that no other friend could do.

No one ever cared for me like Jesus,
There's no other friend so kind as he.
No one else could take the sin and darkness from me.
Oh how much he cared for me.

All my life was full of sin when Jesus found me;
all my heart was full of misery and woe.
Jesus placed His strong and loving arms around me
and he led me in the way I ought to go.

Every day He comes to me with new assurance;
More and more I understand his word of love.
But I'll never know just why he came to save me,
till someday I see his blessed face above.

That's the Jesus I know and love and serve. That's Him. The one who gave himself for me. He is the one born on Christmas Day, coming to earth so we can have salvation and life. Have you welcomed him into your heart? Have you made room for him in your life? Just as he invited the Magi and the shepherds, He invites you to come and see. He is revealing himself to you today. Come and know him. Come and receive the ultimate Christmas present: Jesus and his gift of eternal life! There is no other like Jesus. O how much he cares for you and for me!