

December 20, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

When Love Came Down

Luke 2:14; Numbers 6:22-27

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

The only new thing is also very, very old. How can that be? The gospel of Jesus Christ is both old and new at the same time. It's very old, it's eternal. It's before histories began. It's old and yet new.

How could something be old and new at the same time? Well, we have some human analogies for it. In the early 18th century, an Italian violinmaker named Antonio Stradivari made 1,117 violins. One of those violins in perfect condition today is worth more than one million dollars. I think all of these instruments were made between 1700 and 1735. That's really old. And yet you put that violin in the hand of Isaac Stern, and that's the violin he held when he played for Fiddler on the Roof. You put that violin in his hand, or Itzhak Perlman, and suddenly it becomes very new. The sound is actually fresh, nothing like it. I checked this out with Michael Denham. He said it's really true. There is a sound, incomparably new and fresh, crisp and vivid. Digital sampling will not have the same sound. And it's interesting, this new reality is true of a great pipe organ too! The more an organ is played, the better it is. Which is why the organ at the Kennedy Center is in such bad condition, it is not played enough. And now it's out of shape. But our great organ here at The National Presbyterian Church is played all the time. Come here every day and hear this organ; these fine instruments need to be played, they need to get older and older and mellower and mellower and it gets better and better and better. Isn't that funny? That's not true of a volleyball. When you play that for a while, they begin to lose their ability to

hold air. Some things when they're older, they're not better. But I'll tell you something that's better when it's older, and that is the Stradivarius violin. It's very old and very new at the same time.

And that is true when we think of Advent. We think of what happened that Christmas morning. It's the only new thing in the world. There's nothing newer than a brand new baby. In fact, when the shepherds go to find the savior born in Bethlehem, they're told by the angel, "You'll find a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes." Swaddling clothes? That means the baby doesn't even have his little boy outfit yet. His '49er outfit. He's in swaddling clothes. He's still being wrapped. And there's only a short time in your life when you're wrapped. After that you have real clothes, and everything. If you're a boy you have boy clothes; if you're a girl you have girl clothes. But he is wrapped. How new can you get? And the shepherds are invited to see a brand new baby. "You'll find a baby wrapped still in swaddling clothes" (Luke 2:7). Charles Habib Malik is right. It's the only new thing. Jesus Christ is the only new thing.

And yet the Lord is before all time. It's interesting to me that this oldness is so profound. God's love is old. Remember, we have been on a journey through the Old Testament this fall: the story before the grand story. We saw the Genesis account when God created man, woman, he called them good, and that was the first of the love words in the Old Testament. Good. And when man and woman were created, he said, very good. Very good. And he gave man and woman dominion, which unfortunately becomes bitersweet for our journey because with our dominion, with our freedom, we have made bad choices, and so we get ourselves in trouble. That's the trouble of the garden. But yet God still called it good: The freedom he made, and gave us, enabling us to name and steward all of the created order. All that is called good in the Genesis account, don't forget that. God made you. He loved you and me from the very beginning. That love goes back to the beginning. It's old. It's very old.

And then the shepherds at night hear the good news. When the messenger for God appears at first, they were frightened. But the angel says to them, *Don't be afraid. I bring you good news of a great joy which shall be for all the people.* [Not just for Israel. Not just for you. All people.] *For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord, and this will be a sign for you.* [You are to be a part of the sign.] *You'll find a baby,*

[a brand new boy. A brand new baby,] *lying in the manger*. [And then comes a song just for them.] *Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly hosts*, [a great choir for a handful of shepherds. I'll tell you, God is so luxurious when he wants to be. So poor when he wants to be. Born in a manger, no room in the inn. Yet so rich if he wants to be. And so there's suddenly this great chorus, just like the Robert Shaw Chorale and Atlantic Symphony. This is a new song. It's the first Christmas carol.] *praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth, peace, goodwill to mankind."* (Luke 2:14). That's new.

But you know what, it's not new. You know, that's a repeat of the oldest blessing in the Bible. The oldest blessing is given to Moses. Moses is the hero that brought people out of their captivity in Egypt, and in one great moment in Moses' life, God gives to him a blessing for the people and Aaron is to share it. It's in the Book of Numbers, one of the oldest books. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, "Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying this is how you shall bless the Israelites. You shall say to them, "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you"" (Numbers 6:22-25). There you have both truth and grace, the great theme that appears in John's Gospel. Jesus Christ is the truth and grace. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth" (John 1:14). His face shined, that's light. That's always connected to truth in both the Old and New Testament. The light is always connected to the truth of God's will for our path. "So the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious upon you. The Lord lift up his countenance," that's the ancient Hebrew word for smile. The Lord is smiling upon you "and give you peace" (Numbers 6:26). That's almost the identical blessing that the shepherds heard on Christmas night. Glory to God on the Highest, on Earth, peace, goodwill. That's the good, gracious decision of God. By the way, the word "blessed" is an amazing Hebrew word *barak*. When it's used with reference to us, it means "bow". It's the great word for worship, the bow. But when it's used for God, it means "stoop". God doesn't bow to us. He stoops. He has to stoop down. And that is the marvelous condescension of God. The humiliation of God. That it is grand, and gracious love of God. He comes down to where we are. And that's what the shepherds experienced.

They also are given a sign for this blessing. And what is the sign? A brand

newborn baby. Talk about stooping down. He comes down to where we are. The Lord makes his face shine upon these shepherds and through them to us as well. His love shines upon us. That's grace. God smiles upon you and gives you peace. That's very old and very new at the same time. But now comes the best part. The best part on Christmas morning is when the shepherds are invited to see the good news for themselves. They're invited to find it themselves. I love that. And this, "And you will find this brand new baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger." They are invited to visit for themselves and see the sign. It's important. They become a part of the sign. This is very important theologically. After the birth, there needs to be witnesses to the birth. And it's interesting, the witnesses God chose to attest to the birth. He chose two sets of witnesses that are recorded in the Gospels. One set are the shepherds. And the other are the strange foreigners we meet in Matthew's gospel. The foreigners, perhaps they're Nebatians. The text only says they were from the East. We don't know where they're from. And even that is interesting. These foreigners come. They come to Herod and say 'Where's your new King to be born?' And then Herod of course, when he hears this, he's alarmed. All of Jerusalem's alarmed with him when they heard of the possibility of a birth of the Messiah. Herod is determined to destroy such a dangerous competitor. "Tell me where he is, and I'll come and worship him too" (Matthew 2:8). But the wise men were warned and agreed not to do that, so they returned to their own country. So Herod doesn't get to see the child. He wasn't invited. Who are invited to see the birth? The wise men and the shepherds. And these shepherds become a part of the witness sign. That's very important. This incarnation event needs to be witnessed. We need to have a witness to the fact that God stooped down and came to us. And what is the witness? Wise visitors from the east and shepherds. By the way, they bring gifts. And a lot of people make light of the gifts brought by the wise men — frankincense, gold and myrrh. Some interpreters have made too many speculations about the religious significance of frankincense, myrrh, and gold. Let me clear this up.

Frankincense and myrrh were very, very valuable fragrances. And you have to understand that in the first century, fragrances are just like money. By the way, a friend of mine who's a chemist says frankincense is still used as the base for most perfumes, because it is so powerful. It smells terrible to my nose, but it is so powerful that they add carnations to it, and the carnations smell with a durable, lasting scent. And that's because of frankincense. Extremely powerful. I had a chemist give me a bottle of frankincense and I

used to hold it up for the kids to smell it. Believe me, they didn't like it. It is very, very strong. But it's very valuable. And so what the wise men gave the Holy family, there were three remarkable, valuable gifts. They did not give them an aquarium or something like that. What are you going to do with that? They gave them three valuable things. Frankincense and myrrh, which is like cash, and gold; and as you know, within days, they'll discover that Herod wants to destroy the child like he destroyed his own children. Herod arranged for the murder of his own two sons because he thought they might try to become pretenders to his throne. Herod will massacre the innocents in and around Bethlehem. But before that happens, the Holy family flees for Egypt. How did they support themselves in Egypt when they flee to Alexandria? The wise men took care of them. Frankincense, myrrh and gold. Three practical gifts. That's a great lesson in giving practical gifts.

So they and the shepherds become witnesses. I even think this is humorous. The shepherds are told to go to Bethlehem. Think of it. If the Holy family had found room in the inn, and say they're in Room 320, how are the wise men, or the shepherds, with their sheep with them - they don't have hundreds of sheep. They probably have about a dozen sheep. That's about the size of the first century flocks. About maybe 12, 13 sheep. Where are they going to go, up to Room 320? How will they get up there? Take an elevator? It's fortunate in the province of God that the Holy family did not find a room in the inn. They had to stay in the stable, just right for the shepherds. Just right for twelve sheep. They can fit in and see the birth. Here is this brand new child and even that is the humor of God, the wonder of God, the humility of God, and the fact that there has to be a witness to the birth. And the first two witnesses, the shepherds, the wise men, and then an old woman named Anna and a man named Simeon who are in temple on the same day when Jesus is given the mark of circumcision. They too become the witnesses. So they become historical markers. They validate the event. And they play that role. Jesus our Lord will later invite us to come to him with our faith. That event will also validate his truth.

During the Feast of Tabernacles, when Jesus comes into the city on that great feast day in Chapter 7 of John, at the last day of the feast, Jesus says this to people, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me. And let the one who believes in me drink. And as the Scripture said, out of the believers heart will flow rivers of living water. He said this about the Holy Spirit" (John 7:37-39). And in Matthew 11 our Lord said, "Come to me all who are wea-

ry and heavy laden. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me” (Matthew 11:28-30). Notice what he’s doing. He’s inviting those who hear his words to try it out. He’s inviting them to discover for themselves the truth of his good news. To come and see it. The shepherds hear such a promise too. You will go to Bethlehem and find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes. Are you thirsty? Come and drink the water. Try it out. See it for yourself. He invites us to come and discover. And when we do, we discover his goodness. You know, I’ve been thinking about this invitation of Jesus. Very early in the story of our lives, with the freedom that God gave us we make bad choices. And with the bad choices we made, we do harm to ourselves. We try to be God ourselves. In the Bible, we meet up with not only God’s love for us, but also the bad choices we make. But even though we make wrong choices with our freedom, God’s love still stays for us. He still finds us. And that’s why the good news given to the shepherds is news about the Redeemer; our redeemer. “For unto you was born on this day in the city of David a savior in Christ.” We need to be saved. We need to be made safe. We need to be healed.

There is a question on my mind: How does God draw us together so that we can discover his goodness and in no way cancelling out our freedom? Because he doesn’t force us. Throughout the whole story of the Old Testament, choices are made that go against God’s law and will. Nevertheless, God does not stop us from making bad choices. He doesn’t create barbed wire fences to force us to be good. We are still given that dominion we first met in Genesis Chapter 1. That freedom is still preserved and though it is part of our crisis, it is also part of our glory. We have real freedom. Pascal calls us the “thinking reed.”¹ So then how does God draw us to himself? One way he does it is the way the Australian sheep herders and cattlemen bring their cattle together. Because some of those Australian ranches are so big that fences were not practical. There was too much land. And so how would they draw their animals together? A friend of mine explained how they gathered their cattle. Not with wire but they draw the animals together with wells. With water. Where the water is, where the food is, the animals naturally come together. And that’s how they find them. They draw them together not by fencing them in and enclosing the fence, making it tighter and tighter to force them to come together, but they do it by drawing them in with water. It seems to me that’s what our Lord does to gather us as well. “Are you thirsty? Come and drink.” “Come to me all you who are weary and

heavy laden.” The shepherds hear the same message. “You’ll find the savior.” You go and find for yourself, you can see for yourself. You are invited to make the discovery yourselves. I’ve been thinking about this all year, and a few weeks ago I wrote a poem about it. I called the poem “A Scent of Water.” I got the idea actually, of the scent of water, from one line in the Book of Job. Job is very sad about his life. He feels like he is a fallen tree.

At least there is hope for a tree: If it is cut down, it will sprout again, and its new shoots will not fail. Its roots may grow old in the ground and its stump die in the soil, yet at the scent of water it will bud and put forth shoots like a plant (Job 14:7-9).

And then a thought comes to Job’s mind. He says but even a stump, even a dead stump, will send out shoots at the scent of water. The scent of water. Water has a scent? I never thought water had a scent. But Job said even an apparently dead stump will put out shoots at the scent of water. I realized then that’s how God draws us together. That’s how we discover his grace. The scent of water. Here’s the poem I wrote:

A Scent of Water

*God must be sure of himself
because where I live
there are few fences
to surround and gather in people like me
And so we choose our own way to go
following ideas in our own heads
But where the way arrives we’re not sure
And when the air dries out
Water that tastes good is not easy to find*

Just in time

*the scent of an early rain
and its stream
invites all who are thirsty
to come and drink and to stay awhile.*

When I look back

*I’m sure
the water is what made the difference -
And it was not a moment too soon for me.
God must be very sure of himself and the scent of water.*

The Lord is very sure of his grace. That's why he takes the risk with you and me. He gives us freedom, because he's sure of his grace. He's sure that he's able to draw us close and he does. Jesus Christ is the only new thing. He's also very old. And the promise is right now. This child is good, and the water he gives to us tastes good. God's love is very old, and also very new. And when you hear the music, you know there's nothing like it.

Heavenly Father, thank you for this Christmas as we prepare for the birth of Jesus Christ. Thank you that it's new. It's wonderfully new, but yet eternal. May we taste it. May we experience this living water ourselves. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.

1 Pascal, Blaise. *The Pensees*.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.
Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W.

Washington, D.C. 20016

www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800