

December 6, 2009
The National Presbyterian Church

God So Loved the World

Luke 1:36-55

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

In 1955, Charles Malik, the American University of Beirut Professor of Philosophy and ambassador from Lebanon to the United Nations, gave a speech at Princeton Seminary and he said this:

Never be ashamed of Jesus Christ, or of his Gospel ... it is the only new thing in the world. All else is as old as the hills, even the latest vaccine or the latest bomb. Only the eternal, only that which is the same yesterday, today, and forever is really new. Aim, therefore, always at that which is at once eternal, universal, personal, concrete.¹

That only new thing is the birth of Jesus Christ to a Jewish family in a Jewish town. St. Paul would put it this way in a letter to the Galatians, "When the time fully came, when the time was just right, God sent forth His son, born of a woman, born under the law to redeem those under the law" (Galatians 4:4). That couple, Mary and Joseph, and the town of Bethlehem have a history that has prepared them for this moment. This fall, we as a congregation have tracked that history, the story before the grand story. We started with Abraham, 1,800 years before Christ. And we watched the history of his people unfold. We saw the markers that gave these people profound expectations for God's Messiah, that new thing.

The Messiah would fulfill the promise made to Abraham himself; he would bless Abraham and bless his people and they would become a blessing. They

found their identity in Abraham. Therefore, all through the Old Testament this journey is the journey of a people yearning for a father like Abraham, to remember who they are and to discover what it means to be a people of that covenant of blessing.

The second great marker is Moses who led the people out of captivity to Egypt and is therefore the great deliverer; but more than that, the law giver. Through Moses on Mt. Sinai God gave his non-negotiable covenant, his will for our lives. The truth was discovered. And so there's all through the Old Testament the yearning that the Messiah will fulfill the Law. He will be the grand rabbi, the one who will interpret the Law, help us understand what it means, what is God's will for our life, the truth. And he will also be the deliverer who will deliver us with a profounder deliverance than from the captivity to Egypt. So there is the yearning for a deliverer like Moses.

And then the Messiah will fulfill King David and his kingly reign, Mt. Zion and the possibility and the hope for peace, the hope for joy, for fulfillment. So they looked for a king like David. And these yearnings, these messianic yearnings find their convergence in this only new thing. That's what Paul says. "When the time fully came God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the Law." This Jewish woman, Mary, is the first person in the first century to hear from God that fulfillment, that new thing that is about to come. And Luke narrates for us in chapter 1 that scene when the angel Gabriel appears to Mary.

"In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph of the house of David. He says to her, "Hail, Mary, favored by God." And he says, "I have some news to tell you, some good news. Don't be afraid. You have found favor with God and now you will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, the Lord God, and will give him the throne of his ancestor David." Here is the one that will fulfill all that hope. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end. "So how could this possibly be? I'm just engaged; I'm not even married." He says, "Don't worry, the Holy Spirit will overshadow you and that child will be born of the Holy Spirit." So then at the end she says to the Lord, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be according to your word" (Luke 1:26-38).

And then she sings a song which becomes one of the Nativity songs of the Book of Luke. There are seven beautiful songs that appear in Luke's Gospel. And this song we call the "Magnificat" because the first word of it is "magnify the Lord." We ourselves are going to sing a version of this in just a few minutes after the sermon. And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord; my spirit rejoices in God my Savior. He has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me and Holy is his name" (Luke 1:46-49).

Mary then sings in the song the fact that God will level the ground and there will be a sense of leveling, of his grace and also his judgment. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud and the thoughts of their hearts. He's brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly according to the promise he made to our ancestor, to Abraham and to his descendants forever. You can see that Mary sees that this is going to be the fulfillment of these three grand yearnings of the Old Testament: for a father like Abraham, a deliverer like Moses, and a king like David.

But as the accounts during Advent begin to gather up in the birth narratives of our Lord, we discover that this promise to Israel is widened beyond Israel. This convergence of the messianic hope that Israel hears is going to be expanded. When the shepherds were out in the field at night, which is the very next chapter, they hear an angel that meets them and says, "Don't be afraid, I bring you good news of a great joy to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David [in this Jewish town] a savior, Christ the Lord." And then the great chorale that's sung by the angels, the shepherds, "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth." This song's promise is universal.

It's what Charles Malik said: this only new thing is eternal, personal, concrete, and universal. To all the earth peace, goodwill toward men. Now this Jewish hope is becoming a broader and greater hope than just a fulfillment for ancient Israel. Then when the child Jesus, on the eighth day of his life was taken to the temple to be circumcised, to have that mark of his Jewish identity given to him, the Abrahamic hope confirmed, an old man in the temple, named Simeon, sees this child, comes up to the Holy Family and

says this, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace according to your word. For my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:29-32).

And now beyond just Israel's hope, this hope goes to those who are not Jewish as well as to God's people, Israel. And so we see that widening. That only new thing becomes a new thing not only for the Jews, not only for this Jewish family, not only for Jerusalem, not only for Bethlehem, but for the world.

Well, the fact of the matter is that these longings that the Abrahamic people have are the same longings that we have, that all people have. Each one of us wants to know who we are, the longing for identity is ours too, the longing for a father like Abraham. That Abrahamic blessing interestingly enough was to be blessed in order to be a blessing to others. That oldest promise is itself universal. We all have the yearning for deliverance from captivity-- and there are captivities far worse than the captivity in Egypt from which the Exodus took place: the captivity to sin; the captivity to death; the captivity to fear; to be delivered from these imprisonments. That's why Paul says to be delivered is why this Christ was born. And then for happiness, for fulfillment, for joy, for a kingly reign-- that, too, is a yearning that's universal. The great chorales that are sung at Bethlehem tell of that universal promise. We're invited too. We thought we were outsiders and we discover that we're invited too. We're invited in to experience and to see this wonder.

You know, I've been thinking - it's amazing how time flies. I've been here now a year as Preaching Pastor-in-Residence, at this great church, The National Presbyterian Church, and my wife Shirley and I both are having the most marvelous time here with you. By the way, my wife is not here this weekend. She was going to come back. I went home for Thanksgiving, you know; we went and bought our Christmas tree at the Boy Scout lot. I see the Boy Scouts have a Christmas tree lot here in the parking lot for you to get your tree. We bought our tree. We put it up and put my train up for our little grandchildren - they call it Poppa's delicate train. That's because we learned that with our little kids, even when they were little, they could touch anything with one finger, but they couldn't grab it. So we always said "one finger," and that's worked for that little train.

Shirley was planning to come back with me on Friday because she didn't want to miss the presentation of *Messiah* here tonight. She was here last year and that was the greatest moment of music for us in a long, long time, to hear this 100-voice choir and orchestra which is our Festival Choir tonight at five o'clock presenting *Messiah*. And so she wanted to come. But let me tell you that we're in a family way. Our youngest daughter, Elizabeth, and her husband Eric, are expecting a baby. We think the baby will come December 21st, but this baby may come any time now. Who knows? Because two days ago she had contractions and that caused my wife to cancel her air ticket; and she's going to come after the first of the year, because you know we'll be here up until June.

I told you last year about my own journey in becoming a Christian. A concert played a part in my journey to faith. I had this amazing experience when I was a student at Cal Berkeley. I was a sophomore at the University of California, sort of a secular kid my first two years. I don't know that I even went to church that first year. You know, I'd gone to church as a boy but I kind of drifted away a little bit, I think, when I went to college. And then one day in my sophomore year there was a concert. The concert played a big part in my life.

A concert, imagine, played a big part in bringing me to a place where I trusted in Jesus Christ. And the concert there in Berkeley with full orchestra and a great choir was presenting George Frederick Handel's masterwork *Messiah*, the greatest masterwork probably ever written as far as an oratorio is concerned. My friend who was a musical expert said, "Earl, you should go to this. I know you don't know much about music, but you should go. This is a great work." Now I can remember I'm sure as a boy hearing the great "Hallelujah Chorus;" I'm sure I heard that. But I didn't know anything about that music, and I went to this great concert. And have you ever had an experience where you go to a musical or a show and a tune will stick in your brain and you leave the show singing a tune? That's the mark of a great show. When my son and I saw *Les Miserables* we couldn't stop singing "One More Day." Anyone that's seen *Les Miserables* can't get that tune out of their head, "One More Day." If you've seen *The Music Man* by Meredith Willson, you'll always be singing "River City" after you leave that show. You just can't stop singing it. It's in your head.

And you know, I went to *Messiah* and sat through that great work and

toward the end of *Messiah*, just before the “Hallelujah Chorus” is sung, a contralto stands with this wonderful orchestra and the choir. The contralto sings one song, and I could not get that song out of my head: “He will feed his flock like a shepherd.” I thought to myself, that’s the most beautiful song I’ve ever heard. I still think it is. And then afterward a soprano sang, “Come unto him all ye that are heavy laden.” I couldn’t believe it. I left that concert and I was singing that song. I wasn’t even a Christian yet, but I couldn’t get that song out of my head. And I think about that week my good friend Arba Hudgens invited me to come to a Bible study in our dorm. I lived in an all male dorm. We had a Bible study group there. And I read for the first time through young adult eyes the New Testament, and the rest is history.

That’s how I became a believer; a concert played a great part, because I realized that that amazing song was inviting me in to experience what had happened, that only new thing that had happened in the birth of Christ.

Tonight, if you come to *Messiah* (and I hope you do at five o’clock, don’t miss it. You are making a big mistake if you don’t) you’ll get a printed program with each of the texts printed out for you to read. Handel has it right. The *Messiah* starts Jewish and it ends universal. The texts are from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. They’re telling about the expectation that these people have as they look forward and are thinking through the markers in their life. And you’ll hear it in these songs, “He will purify the sons of Levi” (Malachi 3:3). “And then, “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and call his name Emmanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). But then notice immediately, “O, thou that tellest good tidings to Zion” (Isaiah 40:9). Zion, that’s David’s tomb. That is the center of the Davidic hope. Good news to Zion, the Davidic hope is coming. That’s pure Jewish. And then, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given. The government shall be upon his shoulder and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). That’s the great Davidic hope for joy, for peace, for a king to rule.

And then it begins to shift. You meet the shepherds in the field keeping watch over their flocks at night. The angel of the Lord and the glory of the Lord shines around about them, and then the angel says, “Fear not, for behold I bring you good tidings of a great joy that shall be to all people.” Now suddenly the promise widens beyond the Jewish only story. “For unto you is born this day in David’s city a savior who is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

And the angel doesn't inquire whether the shepherds are Jews or Gentiles. And then there's a multitude of the heavenly host singing, "Glory to God, peace on earth, goodwill toward men." See, God loved the world.

Then once again, "Rejoice, O daughter of Zion, shout and sing O daughter of Jerusalem. Behold your king comes. He's the righteous savior, he will speak peace to the heathen" (Zephaniah 3:14). That's those outside. That's those who don't know yet. "The eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped." These are all texts from the Bible, George Frederick Handel didn't invent any of these; he just saw them. And then comes that great moment just before the "Hallelujah Chorus," when those songs are sung, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms. He will carry them in His bosom, and he will gently lead those who are with young" (Isaiah 40:11). "Come unto him all ye who labor and are heavy laden and he will give you rest. Take his yoke upon you. Learn of him, for he is meek and lowly of heart and you will find rest for your souls" (Matthew 11:28-30). And then, finally, the "Halleluiahs Chorus": "Hallelujah, for the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. The kingdom of this world is become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. And he shall reign King of kings, Lord of lords." It's no longer just Jewish. It is Jewish; it is Israel's hope fulfilled, but it's our hope fulfilled as well. We are all invited in.

It's right that today is Communion Sunday, because on the night that our Lord was betrayed, he took a Jewish event and made it universal. The Lord's Supper, you know, is the Seder meal. It's the Seder meal from Passover, which celebrates the Exodus. And when the bread is broken the youngest boy in the family is supposed to ask his father, "Father, what does it mean?" And then the father narrates the Exodus and tells how God's people were led out of Egypt. But Jesus surprises the disciples. He breaks the bread and probably John, being the youngest said, "Lord what does it mean?" and he said, "This is my body broken for you, for all of you. Do this in remembrance of me (Luke 22:19). It's a far bigger captivity we're being released from than just the Exodus out of Egypt. And then he takes the cup of thanksgiving at the end and pours it and says to the disciples, "All of you drink of this. This is my blood, my life given for you." And St. Paul adds these words, "As long as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you show the Lord's death and his resurrection until he comes" (1 Corinthians 11:26).

This is for us. It's for you. Christmas is for you. Charles Habib Malik had it right. It's the only new thing. It's universal, personal, eternal, concrete.

Heavenly Father, thank you for that. Thank you that this is for us. It's a gift given to us. We have the privilege of sharing in it. We share it with those who have looked forward to it and now we by surprise hear it's also for us. And the fulfillment of the yearning for a father like Abraham, for a deliverer like Moses, for a king like David, that's our yearnings too. And these are fulfilled by Jesus Christ. Now, Lord, prepare us as we come to this table to receive the emblems, the signs and seals of this gift. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

1 Malik, Charles Habib -- from the 1955 Commencement address -- Princeton Theological Seminary.

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

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