

December 7, 2008
The National Presbyterian Church

Room Near the Inn

Luke 2:1-7

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This is Christmas month. My colleague, Eunice McGarahan, began our Advent series of sermons last Sunday; we entitled the series “The Visited Planet”. In 1925, Gilbert Keith Chesterton wrote a book called *The Everlasting Man*. C. S. Lewis said it was the finest book about the Christian faith he had ever read. He first coined the phrase, “Right in the middle of these things stands up an enormous exception. It is quite unlike anything else. It is a thing final like the trumpet of doom though it is also a piece of good news. Good news that seems too good to be true. It is nothing less than the loud assertion that this mysterious maker of the world has visited his world in person.”¹ *The Visited Planet*.

Chesterton says that is what happens in the birth, life, ministry, the death, and the victory of Jesus Christ. We’re celebrating this month the coming of Jesus Christ. He calls it the enormous exception, this amazing grand event. A little later in this same book, he has this to say: “I have not minimized the scale of the miracle--” This is a miracle, that God would visit this planet. It is a miracle. “I have not minimized the scale of the miracle as some of our milder theologians think it wise to do.”

He wrote this in 1925. There were milder theologians then, I guess. “Rather I have deliberately dwelt on that incredible interruption as a blow that broke the very backbone of history.” And he says, “I have great sympathy

with monotheists who think this might be a blasphemy, a blasphemy that might shake the world,” to have such radical things said. And then he ends with this last line: “I’m very sympathetic with those who think this might shake the world but it did not shake the world. It steadied the world.” That is what we’re celebrating. G. K. Chesterton calls it the enormous exception. This grand event, the grand miracle, the coming of Jesus Christ.

But when the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, Mary doesn’t welcome this event as this grand, enormous exception that she fully understands. No, as a matter of fact, Mary’s first words when the Angel Gabriel tells her that she is to bare a son of the Most High, she says, “How can it be? How can it be? I don’t understand this.” And her betroth, Joseph, can’t understand it. He has to be comforted in a dream as recorded for us in Matthew’s account so that he will take Mary. First, he was going to divorce her when he heard that she was pregnant. But the angel comforts him, “No, don’t be afraid. Take her. What is conceived in Mary is of the Holy Ghost.” And Joseph decided to trust but they weren’t prepared. They didn’t expect it. It came as a surprise.

This surprise element persists throughout the entire Christmas narratives. Listen to Luke, the second chapter, how it starts. “In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” Notice the central player here is not God who sends this holy family down to Bethlehem to bare the son, to fulfill the Micah Prophecy. That is not how Luke starts. “In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus.” Mary and Joseph are making the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem not because God is sending them down to fulfill the Micah Prophecy, though that is what happens. They are going because of a Roman edict that says they have to go and be enrolled for Roman Taxation. Luke makes that clear. In fact, he goes into detail. He says,

In those days, a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled.” This was the first enrollment when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled. Each went to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea. [That’s 90 miles. Joseph went with this young woman who is great with child.] And he came to the city called Bethlehem because he was

of the City of David. And he was also of the lineage of David, so he went to David's city, Bethlehem. There to be enrolled with Mary, his betroth, who was great with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered and she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke puts that one last line. "There was no room for them in the inn." In other words, no one was waiting for them. Now, it turns out that they do have distant relatives that lived in Bethany but they are not waiting for them. There's nobody at the inn prepared for them. They are put at the edge. Fortunately, there was room near the inn. That was good enough, it turned out to be good enough, turned out to work out well for shepherds who came with all their sheep. They could not have come to Room 340 in the inn. So, God knows what he's doing. But the inn wasn't ready. Bethany wasn't ready. And you see that also in the Matthew account, Jerusalem wasn't ready. Herod is the king. They are not ready. It is a surprise. It all takes place on the edge where everything happens by surprise. Well, the good news that happened on that day is so good and it turns out to be so true, and it turns out to be so powerfully healing that it does very well out on the margins. It does very well near the inn rather than in the inn. It works out just fine.

By the way if Mary and Joseph began their journey with the Son of God born in a stable, in a manger, because there was no room in the inn, if they began the journey of our Lord's life, at the edge, so did the early Christians. The early Christians are at the edge of Roman society. And, in fact, Saint Paul makes a point of this in his letter to the Corinthians. He says, "Not many of you are of noble birth, but God chose what was foolish as far as the world is concerned to shame the wise." And we know that Saint Paul had tremendous success in preaching to slaves and to servants. And as a matter of fact, in the letter to the Romans, the last chapter, a list of some thirty seven names, and researchers have discovered that one-third of those names are slave names. Paul has met so many slaves in prison and in his ministry and has won them to Christ. And so they work in the Roman Empire. They

are not the leaders of the Roman Empire; they are at the edge of the Roman Empire. And yet they become believers. Now, the irony is they may be the most intellectually talented in the Roman Empire because most Roman citizens' children were taught by slaves and many of the slaves were intellectuals, but that's another story.

But Paul had great success preaching the Gospel to them and they became Christians. But when do they celebrate this birth of Jesus? How do they celebrate the Lord's day? How do they celebrate a great festival like this that occurred in the birth of Jesus Christ? Well, they do it by borrowing times that are available to them. Again, at the edge. We know that Christmas was first celebrated on January sixth and, in fact, to this day, a number of branches of Orthodox Christianity still celebrate on January sixth.

But around the second century, these Christians who lived and worked mainly in Rome had to pick a time to celebrate the birth of Christ. So, when do they do it? They decided to select the date that we now celebrate on, December 25th. Why do they choose December 25th? Because it was the day they had off-work. It was a Roman secular holiday that they could get off work, and so they chose it. And by the way, the holiday is an interesting one. You may have never heard of it, because though it didn't have as much staying power as the event, that borrowed it.

But the day they chose was *Natalis Solis Invicti*, a celebration of the planets and the sun that was celebrated on December 25th. So they chose that day because they had a day off work and then they renamed it and called it *Natalis Christus* in Bethlehem, Judea. And so they had the mass or the celebration, the worship of Christ born in Bethlehem of Judea, Christmas. So they chose a date at the edge of the culture. They can't have a day all for themselves. It is easier to worship the Resurrection of Christ because that is always the first day of the week but what about Christmas? So they chose a Roman holiday and borrowed it.

By the way, I cannot get too exercised or angry about the commercialization of Christmas, because in a way, if anyone should be angry about what happened to Christmas, it should be the commercial and secular community that had a holiday stolen from them. We're the ones that crowded in

on their holiday. We crowded in and borrowed it from them. So we can't get too angry if we find our day commercialized. And the wonder and the goodness of this holiday, of what has happened to what it is we are celebrating in Advent, is that the birth of Jesus Christ is so powerfully good. It is so true. It is so healing that when we see it for ourselves and when it dawns on us what's happening on this day when, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us full of grace and truth," when that dawns on us, that makes all the difference and suddenly this holiday becomes so important in our lives.

One of my favorite Christmas poems is the poem written by W.H. Auden. It is a very long and complex poem. It is called "For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio." It is probably his major work and W.H. Auden is a tremendous American poet. In that poem, it has flashbacks between the 1st century and our century--he wrote it in the 20th century. And so he is moving back and forth and reflecting on the birth of Christ and all that happened in Judea at that time and then the present tense.

Toward the end of the poem, the writer becomes cynical and that cynical stance becomes an important marker. He reflects on Christmas as he is celebrating it right now. And he has this wonderfully funny line that appears in W. H Auden's poem. He says, "Oh, yes, Christmas." He is putting away all the decoration. He's unpacking everything and putting the tree away and this thought occurs to him, he says, "Oh, yes, Christmas. It is that season when we all try unsuccessfully to love our relatives." That's a cynical comment for sure: "Oh, yes, Christmas, that time when we all try unsuccessfully to love our relatives."²

But then suddenly, one thing flashes into his head. And the one thought that flashes into his head after that cynical comment turns out to be the great line of the whole poem. It is a line that W. H Auden is most remembered for. He says, "Ah, but remembering the stable where for once in our lives, everything became a You and nothing was an It," that personal moment when God spoke in that person, Jesus Christ. That is greater than all these decorations, greater than the celebration when we try to love our relatives. It is greater than everything else and Auden puts that right in the middle of his poem, and he puts it in the cynical part of the poem. "Ah, remembering the stable where for once in our lives, everything became a

You and nothing was an It.”

I love that about Christmas. We are going to celebrate the Lord's supper in just a few moments and have you thought of the fact that the Lord's Supper also is an event at the edge, not in the middle of history. Jesus Christ died in Holy Week on that Friday and his disciples all thought it was a great defeat, a total defeat. They were completely, totally discouraged.

In fact, J.S. Bach in his great Mass according to St. Matthew has this line, “Oh, Golgotha, unhappy Golgotha. There the Redeemer dies. Who now will the world's redeemer be?”³ A total failure when he looks at Friday and then on Easter Sunday, a tremendous victory is discovered. But on Friday at the edge, everyone thought Jesus had failed. Jesus Christ, when he died, absorbed human sin. He took death upon himself. He took the power of evil upon himself and we did not understand what was happening then, until later in the vindication, we realized that when he did that at the cross, he disarmed sin, and disarmed death, and disarmed the power of evil by taking them. Only he could do that. He did it. We did not understand it.

In fact, the writer of Hebrews puts it plainly in Hebrews 13, “Jesus Christ died outside the gate, at the edge.” That's where it happened. And when we celebrate the Lord's Supper, we're celebrating that event. We're celebrating that fulfillment of the prophecy which we celebrate now at Christmas when Christ came alongside of us, in a stable. And when it dawns on us and we realize how good, how powerful that is, it changes everything. Christmas is really a surprise. It is a surprise for many of us. When it dawns on us how deep and real it is and sometimes, it happens right in the middle of everything else when you were not looking for it.

Can I tell you a story? When I was a boy, I went to church in our little community of McCloud, California. I went to the Sunday school. I went to the youth group. I went to all the Christmas events and I was a faithful kid in the church and then I went off to college, University of California at Berkeley. In my first two years there, I sort of became a secular youth. I just drifted away. I didn't go to church. It was not a category in my life. I wasn't even thinking about it. I got into other things and I just became a secular

boy.

And then an amazing thing happened and it was very touching for me because it happened, during Christmas--just before the Christmas break, George Frideric Handel's "Messiah"--1641 was performed and this masterwork was performed in Berkeley and one of my friends said, "You know, you should go to see that because that is a masterwork." Well, I had never seen it. I came from a small town. I'd heard the "Hallelujah Chorus," I'm sure, in our church but that's about it. I didn't know anything about it. It became one of the greatest moments of my life. I went to that concert. I was blown away. I wasn't prepared for it. I thought it was just a musical event, and I found that when I left that concert--this is still so indelible in my memory--that I had melodies in my head I could not get out of my head. Have you ever gone to a musical where they just simply will not leave? And the text, too, the amazing text, as well, that I could not forget. And I walked away from that concert and those melodies were in my head.

The most important of all were two. One sung by the contralto and then followed up with the soprano, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd." I thought to myself, "That's the most beautiful song I ever heard." And then followed with the soprano, "Come unto me all ye who are heavy laden." I couldn't get it out of my head. I couldn't sing it very well but I couldn't get it out of my head.

The first text from the Book of Isaiah, the prophet looking forward, that he will feed his flock like a shepherd. The second words of our Lord from Matthew 11 where Jesus says, at one point, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for my yoke is easy and my burden is light."

Jesus was a carpenter with his dad. He was until almost age 30. You know what carpenters built in Nazareth when Jesus was a carpenter? We have all these ideas that he had built cabinets. No, the Amish build cabinets. What would a carpenter build in the 1st century? You know the most important thing carpenters would build would be yokes for animals especially where two animals are put side-by-side, and it takes such skill to build a yoke that will pull two animals side-by-side without hurting either of them. What do

you think Jesus made as a carpenter? Probably yokes and with that in mind, think of that promise he makes, "Come unto me all you who labor and are heavy laden, I'll give you rest." Take my yoke upon you. I know how to make a yoke that fits. It is easy. My burden is light when the yoke is right." And when that dawns on you and you realize how good is this person who made that promise, how good he is that made the promise to each of us to come unto him, all you who labor and are heavy laden, or the promise he will feed his flock like a shepherd, it changes everything and that which was on the edge now comes to the center. That's Christmas.

Heavenly Father, thank you for Christmas. Thank you that you know how to make the yoke to fit us. You know how to meet us even at the edges when we're not looking, when we aren't expecting to find anything. And then, it breaks in on us and we remember the stable where for once in our lives everything became a You and nothing was an It, and we realize that our lives are important, that you love us. Lord, may we experience that now as we celebrate the Lord's Supper and as we experience it during this time of Advent. In Christ's name, we pray. Amen.

- 1 Chesterton, G. K. *The Everlasting Man*. New York: Image Books, 1955.
- 2 Auden. W. H. *For the Time Being: A Christmas Oratorio*, Random House, 1944.
- 3 J. S. Bach, *Passion According to St. Matthew*, conducted by Gustave Leonhardt, Deutsche Harm Mundi, 2005.

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

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