

Sermon for Tuesday Evening, December 24, 2013, Christmas Eve, Luke 2:1-20 "Retelling the Story"

Why do we retell this story on December 24th each year, when the sky is dark as the deepest sapphire with faceted glints of stars above?

Why do we retell the story of that humble place, a little town heretofore known only for its role in the life of King David?

Why do we retell the story of a difficult journey and a worried father-to-be and a young woman so great with child that the 90 mile journey took what seemed like forever?

Why do we retell the story of delivery in a rude cave, with only livestock as company, and the remarkable things that happened to some dirty, chilled-to-the-bone shepherds on a hillside?

Why do we repeat it, for what may be the third or seventy-third time in our lives?

Why? Because we need to remember it. We need to hear the implicit promise in it, the hope, the joy, the love...because our God is a God of hope and love.

Think for a minute about what life was like for the followers of the One True God in those days. They were oppressed by the Roman overlords, of course. But they were also oppressed in a different way by their own understanding of God.

All those laws, codified in Torah! All those rules about what was clean and what was unclean, who was righteous and who was not, what was expected in every aspect of their daily life! Their lives were ruled not only by Romans but also by an understanding of relationship with God that was based upon fear of judgment. Every day, every action, every momentary lapse in following the law might cause God to turn his wrath toward you. In this scheme, God was a fierce and frightening judge who was just waiting for you to make the tiniest of slips, and then you would be smited, banished from His presence...until, of course, you made the necessary offerings and repented before the religious leaders who stood in for God's judgment on earth.

What did God think of all that rule-making and rule-following? Most likely, he shook his head in dismay and thought "they've forgotten how much I love them. They've confused behaving in a loving manner toward each other and thus honoring me with a code of rules to keep them safe from my anger. They've forgotten that a loving parent requires right behavior so that his children can live in love and peace rather than simply fearing that parent's punishment. They do not know me anymore."

And so God came up with a plan. It was a plan full of rule-breaking, because God has an ironic sense of humor.

First, take a young woman. She has no status in society. She is not yet married, so she is simply the property of her parents, like a goat or a sheep. She comes from a very modest family, no money to speak of, no power, no privilege. But she will be the linchpin of the plan, because she will become pregnant.

No, not the normal human way, as wonderful as that is. She will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit, a miraculous conception. She is thus unclean in the eyes of her neighbors, pregnant before marriage. A nobody who must have behaved badly.

Second, take a man. He's a little bit older than the girl. He may have been married before, may have even had a child or two before, but he is now able to marry. He is a follower of the rules. He becomes betrothed to this girl and he is happy about it. She comes from a good religious family and she seems like a good girl, another rule-follower, until he learns that she is pregnant.

Can you imagine his dismay? She hasn't followed the rules. She has made a fool of him. He should follow the rules and break their engagement...and he plans to do this, until he has a dream which tells him of the miracle of this pregnancy. There is nothing in his rule-book about this, but it is God's message to him, so he grits his teeth and obeys.

Third, there is a Roman emperor, Augustus Caesar. He wants to count all his subjects, so he can calculate how much in tax revenue he can expect, so he Everyone must return to the home town of their tribe or clan, so they may be counted. Never mind that it is an imposition on his subjects. The emperor must be obeyed!

The girl, now round as a ripe pear, and her betrothed, make the arduous journey to Bethlehem, where his people come from. The city of David. They are the last of their clan to arrive in the town. They could not go fast, because the bumpy ride on the donkey was hard on her, so by the time they arrive, there are no lodgings available. Someone takes pity on them and lets them use the cave where the livestock is kept.

It is unclean of course, in the literal and ritual sense. Manure is good for spreading in the fields to grow wheat. It is not so good for newborn infants who are fragile as they draw their first breath. God's irony once again is evident.

Fourth, there is a child. A baby. The girl's child is born in the malodorous place where the animals live. Babies are born all the time of course, but this is different. This is a child that comes from God. All children come from God, of course, but this child is not only from God, he IS God. God Godself, wrapped in the tiniest of human bodies, a delicately perfect and beautiful newborn child. No palace courtiers in attendance at God's birth. No royal physicians, no midwives. Just a woman who is herself barely out of childhood, a man who is still trying to figure out what is happening, a cow, a donkey, perhaps a bird or two, maybe a cat...yes, this is not your usual royal birth. Yes, it breaks all the rules of ritual and purity.

But do not doubt it. It is a royal birth, a divinely royal birth. God Godself, wrapped in the soft pink skin of a human baby, that lovely baby smell about him, as he makes little "ooh" shapes with his lips and seeks his mother's breast for his first taste of human sustenance.

Do the people in the town hear his first cries? Most likely not. They are all exhausted from their own journeys. But out on a hillside, there are shepherds. Shepherds, who live out in the open with their flocks. Not much welcome in the town, because they smell live the livestock they keep, and because more than a few of them drink a little too much to keep warm on the chilly nights.

Cue the angels, with their message of this extraordinary birth! Do they bring this message to the king or to Augustus Caesar? Surely he must be told of this event! But no, God is more subtle than that, and God has a point to make. So the angels go to those shepherds, those dirty, rough, slightly inebriated fellows who sleep with their flock. It is to them that the royal announcement is made. God's irony, once again. They do not proclaim to earthly princes, but to the lowliest, the unclean, the story of the birth of God to the girl about whom the neighbors whispered, in the presence of the man who was laughed at and who was so very confused by it all.

This is the story. It is a story that God set into motion when we forgot how much we were God's beloved. When we thought that we simply wanted to avoid getting God angry with us for not following the rules. God himself broke the rules to give us this baby, this Jesus Christ, to show us that God's primary desire as God interacts with us is love.

You see Jesus, the baby born this night, and you see love in action. Love in caring, love in healing, love in teaching. Love in forgiving. Love in accepting that life sometimes brings great tragedy. Love in promising never to leave us. Jesus' love is God's love made visible in a thousand ways.

We retell this story every year for a very specific purpose: we need to be reminded that we are loved. We need to be reminded that our God was willing to come and be with us, to be circumcised in the temple, to get scrapes and bruises and be potty trained and get the chicken pox and learn how to be polite to his elders and do what his earthly parents instructed him to do, to grow up and do work that put himself at risk, to give himself utterly to us.

All because of love. All because we had forgotten how much God loves us. All because we had confused following the rules with loving the one who made us.

So remember this: on this night, over two thousand years ago, a baby was born. Not in a palace, in a cave with animals, the blessed gifts of God's first creation. He was heralded not to kings and emperors, but to lowly folk, the poor ones who needed to feel God's love most of all. He came not to a princess, but to a poorly educated teenager whose morals were questioned because of this strange and marvelous pregnancy, because those who are shamed and damaged by the world hunger for one who will redeem them and love them in all their brokenness.

This is the story that we retell: God loved us so much he came to be with us, all so we could learn just how deeply and passionately he loved us. He loves us still. Let there be joy in all the world this night. God loves us still.

Amen.