

FINDING MEANING IN AN OLD MESSAGE

INTRODUCTION This morning we're going to set to one side, at least temporarily, some of our own immediate problems and present day concerns and go back - way, way back - almost two thousand years to that wonderful story that is recorded for us in the second chapter of the Gospel according to St. Luke. Since it was read to you a few minutes ago as our scripture lesson, I shall not take time to read it to you again.

"And she brought forth her first born son, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."

IT WASN'T A REALLY GOOD TIME FOR MARY... When you really stop to think about it, it wasn't a particularly good time for Mary to have her baby. The Jews, as a people and as a nation, were pretty much on their last legs. Things had been going from bad to worse for several generations, and now they were living under the harsh and stern rule of the Roman Empire. There were uprisings every week, and we are told by the historians that there were hundreds of crucifixions by the Romans in order to keep down the number of such uprisings. And then too there was a great deal of hard taxation, and as you might expect under the circumstances there was a great deal of graft and corruption in connection with the collection of the taxes. There was a general spirit of discontent among the people. They were restless and nervous. And even the great Temple was not what it had once been. Those who listened for the strong, clear voice of the prophet usually ended up hearing nothing more than the weak mumblings of the scribes and pharisees.

A young prospective mother living in that time might easily have asked herself this question: "If my baby is a boy what chance is there for him in such a world? Here we are a despised people living on the fringe of a great empire. What future is there for him in such a world. What chance is there that he will ever grow up into adult manhood?"

And then too there was the inconvenience of the census. Rome, in all of its authority and with all of its typical efficiency, had declared that the number of people living in the conquered provinces must be counted. And so the head of the family had to go to his home town and there register for the census. And so we read in Luke's Gospel that

"Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his espoused wife who was great with child"

I've often thought that it must have been a great inconvenience for Mary to have had to travel over those hard and dusty roads of Palestine in her condition without much money and without any of the conveniences that make travelling so much easier in our own time. It really wasn't a good time for Mary to have her baby.

Perhaps you might be able to think of a better time. You might even be tempted to suggest our own time. And yet as you stop to think about it, even our own time which lives under the shadow of an atomic war doesn't offer a child a future filled with nothing but hope and optimism. I think the truth of the matter is this that there never is a completely good and perfect time to bring new life into the world. The world is never the kind of world that we would like it to be in order to bring new life into it. As a matter of fact, as I observe life, I would be tempted to carry this thought one step further and suggest this to you that there never is a completely good and perfect time to do anything great and good in life. The time, I suppose, is always to a varying degree out of joint with our wishes. Do you see what I mean. Perhaps you do and perhaps you're saying to yourself "Yes.....there is some truth in what you say.... there never seems to be a perfect time to change jobs.....or a perfect time to go into the hospital to have that operation that I know I must have.....or a perfect time to take on new responsibilities. There never seems to be a perfect time to get married.....or to have children."

Yes....it wasn't a good time for Mary to have her baby, and yet in spite of everything, she went right ahead and had it. The Story of the Annunciation which is found in the first chapter of Luke's Gospel, while it may be largely legendary, does nevertheless indicate to us the attitude that was the governing spirit of this young woman in the time of difficulty. When the angel of the Lord first appeared to Mary and told her that she had been especially chosen by the Lord to fulfill his divine purpose, she was perplexed and puzzled as any young woman might be. And then when the angel of the Lord told her that the child she was to bear would be Jesus, the son of the most high God, she said, "But how can this be....." But when the angel then went on to explain to her that the spirit of God would rest upon her and that he would use her as a channel of his divine purpose, she responded by saying: "Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done according to thy word."

In other words what she was saying was something like this: "I am ready. The time is not exactly right. The circumstances are far from perfect. As far as I can see, the way is clouded with difficulties. The path appears to be rocky and treacherous. But nevertheless if this is what God wants me to do, I will do it and I will do it gladly. I will exercise all of my faith and trust as I proceed along the way. And I will pour into this experience all of my gifts of tenderness and devotion, my gifts of love and care, just as though the future were as bright as the noon day sun!

And so this beautiful old story tells us that Mary went about her way doing the very best that she could. It was impossible for her to have the child in her own home in Nazareth. It was even impossible for them to find a room in the inn in Bethlehem. It was too crowded. But fortunately the inn keeper was a kind and understanding sort of person and found them a place in a stable not far from the inn. I'm sure it was far from perfect. But it would have to do. It was all that was available. And when the child was born, Mary kept him close and warm as any mother would do.

It seems to me that there's something of a lesson in all of this for us. So often as we come up against some of the difficult and challenging experiences of life, we would do well to remember that there never is a completely perfect and ideal time to face these experiences. The time is always to a varying degree out of joint with our wishes. And what we need to do in so many instances, is to strike out and venture forth in spite of all of these external circumstances that would tend to discourage us from doing so and with faith and trust in the laws of life and in God himself, move courageously forward into whatever the experience may be.

JUST WHEN LIFE IS BEGINNING
TO FALL APART, THEN IT IS..

As I was preparing this sermon this past week, I was reminded of something that happened to me a good many years ago, and since it ties in here in a general sort of way with the second thought that I would like to share with you this morning, I thought perhaps I'd include it and share it with you.

Yes it happened many years.... I was in the third grade at the time, attending school number 22 in the city of Albany. It was just about this time of year. We were having a Christmas party in the class room. The tree was there, beautifully decorated, and underneath the tree there was quite a pile of Christmas presents. We had drawn names the week before, the idea being of course that each child would bring a present for the boy or the girl whose name he had drawn. We all brought our presents and finally the afternoon came when the presents were to be handed out. The teacher served as Santa Claus, reading the names and handing out the presents. Of course I was sitting there on the edge of the seat waiting for my name to be called. Each time she picked up a present and looked at the name, I'd hold my breath thinking that perhaps it might be mine. Finally she came to the last present. It was a good sized box. She read off the name, but it wasn't my name. I was the only child in the class room who didn't get a Christmas present. It was a shattering experience. I somehow managed to hold back the tears and conceal my disappointment. I went home broken hearted. Later on I learned what had happened. The little girl who had drawn my name was sick and apparently she hadn't thought enough of me to send it to the school. I learned very early of course that disappointment is part of life's over all pattern, and that all of us have our share of them, and all of us are quite sympathetic with those who have them. We're quite sympathetic with the little boy who slipped under the side of a huge tent thinking that there was a circus going on inside, and who discovered after he got inside that it wasn't a circus but a revival taking place. I know how he must have felt.

Seriously however, disappointments come to all of us. They're woven into the pattern of life, and the more I see of life and of people, the more convinced I am of the fact that one of the greatest lessons that we can learn in life is how to handle life's disappointments and discouragements. And it seems to me too that this Christmas story has something to say to us in this respect. I've often thought that if we were not quite so familiar with this story it would startle us more and perhaps mean much more to us than it does. Some of us are so familiar with it that we have lost sight of the deeper truths that are involved. It suggests to us so many things concerning the power and the vitality of God. It reminds us, for instance that just when life appears ready to fall apart at the seams, then it is that God is likely to bring forth something new and glorious for us. That when the night is dark, his angel appears with a song of joy. That when the sky is black, his star

appears in the East to those who have the spiritual eyes to see it.

I don't know how many of you receive the Sunday edition of the New York Times. If you do receive and read it, you may have noticed an article in last Sunday's magazine section that had to do with this new Broadway musical "The Sound of Music". As some of you know, it is based on the actual life experiences of the Von Trapp family of Austria in the late 1930's. The final curtain in the musical falls as the Baron and Baroness Von Trapp and their seven children are setting out from an Austrian abbey there they have taken refuge from pursuing Nazis soldiers to climb the mountains to Switzerzland and freedom. The article went on to point out that the end of the play was just the beginning of a new life for the von Trapp family, and that it was the first of a number of occasions when the Baroness von Trapp was reminded that "Whenever God closes a door, he opens a window". That's a beautiful thought. It's worth thinking about and worth repeating: "Whenever God closes a door, he opens a window".

Just when you feel that the end has come and that there's nothing more for you, then it is that God has a way of confronting you with some new idea, or some new experience. Those of you have lived longer than I have can certainly testify to the truth of this observation. I've seen it happen in my own life, and I'm sure that many of you have experienced the same thing in your life. We don't know how it happens. We can't always explain it. But somehow it does happen. One of the most helpful thoughts that I've ever heard or come across came from a saintly professor that I had in seminary who said: "Our disappointments can often be God's appointments". I don't know how you are but some times I find these statements and expressions coming to me in moments of difficulty and discouragement. They help us along our way and support us in times of trouble.

Perhaps this is why there is always such a great deal of joy and happiness at Christmas time. It's a kind of joy that's undefeatable. It's a kind of joy that undergirds all of our temporary surface sadness. It's a great promise - even more than a promise - it's a demonstration of the love and the kind of life that is behind this universe. It reminds us that just when life appears to be falling apart at the seams, then it is that God is likely to bring forth some new and glorious experience for you.

CLOSING OF SERMON

And so just to bring it all together here in the closing minutes of our time together this morning. There are, generally speaking, two kinds of Christmas sermons. First there is the kind that goes straight inside the Christmas story, that goes to the very heart and core of it and tells you how the Word became flesh and came and dwelt among us. And then there is the kind of sermon that goes around the edges and the fringes of the Christmas story, picking out some of the details of it, and lingering here and there in the margins, and considering some of the implications of it. The sermon this morning, I suppose, is of the latter variety and it suggests to us two thought that we would do well to remember:

First: there never is a completely good and perfect time for so many of life's experiences. And what we need to do is to nevertheless strike out and go forward with faith and trust in the laws of life and in God.

Second: When life appears to be falling apart at the seams, then it is that God is likely to bring forth something new and glorious for you. Your disappointments can be his appointments.....for as a door closes, he is opening a window.

LET US PRAY:

GOD OUR FATHER, as we celebrate the birth of thy son, we are reminded once again of how thou didst come into our world in the form of an infant child in order to save it.

We know that in Christ we can find forgiveness for our sins.
healing for our hurts.
strength for our weaknesses.
peace for our troubled minds.

In this season of goodwill, help us to open our hearts that we may receive all of the blessings that attend his coming into our world. And lead us, we pray, to that place where the wise men of all ages have knelt - before the manger of the Christ Child in Bethlehem. Amen