

"REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTMAS STORY"

INTRODUCTION

There are two ways to speak about Christmas on a Sunday like this. One way is to reflect on the meaning of Christmas in terms of the modern world - the current events and contemporary concerns that affect our lives. The other way is to turn to the Christmas story itself, to reflect on it, to linger here and there in the margins of it, to let it speak to us.

More often than not over the years I seem to have taken the first approach in my Christmas sermons. This year, however, I have chosen the second way. We turn, therefore, to the Christmas story - not to dissect it or to analyze it the way the historian might, or as we might on other occasions in a Bible Study group. This is not the time for that. We turn to it to lose ourselves in the mystery and the wonder of it, letting some of the overtones of it spill over and touch our lives.

IT BEGINS IN ROME

The story of Christmas begins in Rome, in the center of the western world. It begins with Augustus Caesar, the nephew of Julius Caesar, the man who defeated Antony and Cleopatra at the Battle of Actium, and made himself the sole ruler of Rome, its first Emperor, and for forty-four years was the master of the western world. It begins in Rome with Caesar Augustus and with a royal command that everyone go to his own home town to be registered. Whether such a census actually took place, we do not know for certain for historians vary in their opinions regarding it.

But this much we do know. We can never escape the machinery of life. In every well-run government there is a certain amount of red tape and regulation that is inevitable and inescapable. I was reminded of this this past week as the tax forms, first from the state and then yesterday from the city, arrived....along with some beautiful Christmas cards. In every well-run family and in every well-run life, there is a certain amount of law and order that often seems to be like so much red tape and we can never completely escape from it. Even the church has it. And even God, when He chose to come into the world, did not circumvent the machinery of life that can be so frustrating to us. He came right out of a piece of imperial machinery which was making life complicated and difficult for a great many people living in the provinces of Rome.

Another thought to turn over in our minds. We cannot always tell just how important a thing is by the prominence of the place it occupies. Things that at the time seem to be so important sometimes turn out to be utterly insignificant, while the things that seem minor at the moment turn out to be world-shaking. For instance, in the year 1809 Napoleon, on the march toward the victory that was his ultimate ruin, defeated the Austrian armies in the Battle of Wagram. This was an important, world-shaking event. Everybody knew about it. In the same year a boy was born in Shrewsbury, England, son of an English doctor, and also in the same year another boy was born in Hardin County in Kentucky, son of a wandering, illiterate worker. One was Charles Darwin; the other Abe Lincoln. From the perspective of history and vantage point of time, these were the decisive events of 1809.

The Emperor who seemed so grand and powerful as the Christmas story begins to unfold, and this royal decree that seemed so significant, coming from the city that looked so impressive - all these eventually fade into insignificance before something else that happened in an obscure corner of the known world of that time.

THE STORY MOVES

The story now moves to that corner, a distance province of the Roman Empire, called Judea. It moves from the center of things to the edge of things, and in a sense, this is somewhat unusual.

I think if you and I were constructing the plot of a story, we would move things gradually from the edge further and further in toward the center, but this story seems to go the other way - from the center of the world to one of its outermost edges. It moves from the high and the mighty to the low and the humble, to the little people, to those who are so often pushed around in life - this time to a couple caught in the machinery of this imperial decree.

They complied with the regulations. They had no choice but to comply. It was not a convenient time for them to make this trip, probably on foot, to the city of Jerusalem. The wife was about to have a child. From Jerusalem, they went on to Bethlehem, for this was Joseph's city. It was a small, tiny town to the south of Jerusalem, but it was a village with a great past, great simply because one man had left his mark upon it. It was David's city. And it shone like a star among all the towns of that little province. And so Mary and Joseph made their way from the northern county of Galilee, south to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem.

Again, we pause in the story to reflect upon another thought that comes to mind. It is true, is it not, that things look backward as well as forward in life. Things do not just happen out of the blue. This is to say that there's a continuity to life. One thing leads to another and what we do today will have some bearing upon what we are or what happens tomorrow. What we are today is to a degree the result of what we did yesterday. When God came into the world, He too came out of the past, with roots in history, and he was born in a city that had a great memory. Jesus was a branch on a full grown tree, a shoot out of the stump of Jesse. In other words, there was a development that led finally to Jesus - through the prophets and the priests to the Master, the Man of Nazareth.

And by the same token, we look backwards as well as forward at Christmas time. I know I do, and I imagine you do too. We look back to other celebrations of the same day. We look back to the home which gave us life, and if it was a good home, we have nothing but gratitude in our hearts. We look back to the family circles and gatherings that gave so much to our life. It is true that ~~what~~ a man descends from has a great deal to do with what he ascends toward. Jesus came from plain, humble people, but not from lazy or irresponsible folk.

It was while they were in Bethlehem that Mary gave birth to Jesus. The only thing on earth that's as common as birth is death. Both are utterly mysterious. Both are beyond our comprehension, but birth is the greater mystery - the creation of life where there was none, the planting of a seed which may unfold into a personality that will in time change the course of history, the hidden possibilities, the potentialities, the wonder and the beauty of life that is yet to come. This certainly is the mystery of all mysteries, and it stirs us whether it is the birth of Jesus or the birth of our own child.

NO ROOM FOR THEM IN THE INN

To make matters worse than they already were, the inn in Bethlehem was full because other people were in town for the same reason that Mary and Joseph were. There was no place for this Galilean couple. The inn keeper took people on a first come, first serve basis which was only right. He did the best he could and gave them a place in a stable at the back of the inn and there the baby was born. The circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. Let us put that down in our minds this Christmas, and let me remind you of a few instances, although you could repeat them and add to them, I'm sure.

John Keats was the son of a livery stable keeper. By the time he was 20, he was infected with tuberculosis and died when he was 26 - and yet, out of those ungracious circumstances came the magic of the Ode on a Grecian Urn, and so many of those other poems that have sung their way into the minds of English speaking folk. Hans Christian Andersen was the son of a cobbler. His father and mother were so poor that they had to make their own furniture and the bed that he was born in was the frame of a coffin that a Count had died in. And yet, out of those unfavorable circumstances came the most delicate, fragile fairy stories that the world has ever heard.

Robbie Burns, a ploughboy, born in a cottage in Scotland that didn't even have a window to let in the light of day. ~~Albert Einstein was so slow to learn that talk that his parents thought him abnormal and teachers considered him to be something of a misfit.~~ Booker T. Washington was born in a single room cabin; his mother was a slave and nobody was ever quite sure who his father was. Marian Anderson lost her father when she was a child and her mother worked all those years in Wanamaker's store in Philadelphia.

Indeed, the circumstances of life are not always favorable to life's highest and finest possibilities. We might go so far as to say that when the circumstances of life seem to be most unfavorable we sometimes have the finest flower of human achievement. A cattle stall is not exactly the place where you would expect the Prince of Peace to be born, nor are the circumstances of his life what we would consider adequate for the raising and nurturing of a child. And yet - out of these poor things, what great things grew. The wings of the spirit are not bound by the bonds of earth.

Let me say to you once again what I have said many times from this pulpit. There is no promise that the circumstances of life will always be favorable. The promise revealed in the Gospels is that God will always more than match the circumstances of life with the strength to meet them.

THE STORY MOVES AGAIN

At this point the story moves once again. This time out into the fields of Bethlehem under a night sky. It moves in a strange and wondrous fashion. It moves from Caesar and his royal decree to some shepherds and their flocks. ~~From the mighty to the humble. After all, it is not apt to be the great things of life in which the seed of life is found, but in the small things.~~ So often it's in the small things - things like a simple word, a gesture, a glance - things like a simple man doing a good, straightforward deed - things like an unknown person responding to the intimations of the highest. In things like these we find the seeds of creative life just as we find in the manger of Bethlehem the life that has made life possible for so many other people.

There were the shepherds - surprised by an angel. Don't ask who the angel was, or what he was like, or whether he had a physical body or not. He probably didn't. You cannot put these things into photographs. You can paint them, and you can sing about them, but you cannot take pictures of them. But whatever the form of the angel, the angel had an announcement and the announcement was not that the world would be perfect from then on, but that a Saviour had been born. In other words, the Christmas announcement was not that all would be well from that moment on, but rather that into the imperfect world that we live in had come a saving life.

And then the heavens began to sing for joy, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and goodwill to men". The story ends quietly and simply as the shepherds go quite faithfully and obediently without asking questions to Bethlehem. They were not at all like we would be. They were not sophisticated or skeptical. They went straight to Bethlehem to see what had happened and they found things exactly as they had been told. They saw a man, a mother, and a baby.

MORAL OF THIS STORY

The moral of this beautiful story is this. Into this imperfect world once came the perfect love of God. And whenever and wherever that love of God in Christ comes into our world today - there is glory and there is peace. Whenever, wherever - now, here, in you, through you, in situations no matter how tragic, how trying, how complex - wherever and whenever the love of God in Christ comes - there is glory and there is peace.

PRAYER

We thank thee, O God, for the light that came into our world in the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Help us, as we try to catch that light in our own lives. Let it shine through us to pierce the darkness of some dark place this Christmas. We ask these things in the name of Him who was born in a stable, even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen