

sermon-12/24/10 Newport Pres. Church
“A Christmas Meditation”
Luke 2:1-20

Rabbinical commentaries on the Old Testament can sometimes surprise us. For example, one rabbi writing in the year 270 found “a text to be so devoid of meaning and beauty” that he questioned whether it even belonged in Holy Scripture. What text was he referring to? This may surprise you, but it was Psalm 23! “The rabbi does not care much for this psalm because it compares God to a shepherd, and ‘no position in the world is so despised as that of the shepherd.’”

This poor estimation of shepherds was true even when Luke was writing his gospel. You had to watch your belongings when a shepherd was in the neighborhood. They could not be trusted. This lets us know that when Luke gives such a prominent role to shepherds on that first Christmas more is going on here in chapter two of his gospel than meets the eye.

In fact, this story we read every Christmas Eve can be read on many levels. On the surface it is a very familiar, touching story. Reading it brings back warm feelings of Christmases past. Children love placing shepherds with their sheep in the family manger sets.

But, underneath the surface is a much more complicated story. It is a story of oppression where an earthly ruler can force his subjects to travel for a census. Even if they are pregnant and the journey is dangerous and uncomfortable they still had to go. The census was all about taxation. They wanted to make sure their tax rolls were accurate. Exorbitant taxation was all part of the oppression.

Underneath the surface of the story are the names given to Jesus by the angel: Savior and Lord. Those were titles given to Caesar Augustus. For Luke to call Jesus by those titles was to say Jesus was the true king, not Augustus. That was treason. Luke had a political agenda for his story.

Underneath the surface we see an army of angels, which is what is meant by “the heavenly host.” The baby Jesus had an army like Caesar Augustus. Unlike other king’s armies, however, this army preached peace, not war.

And, underneath the surface we see that Luke is blowing the minds of his early readers with the role he gives to the shepherds. These shepherds, as we said before, are near the bottom of the social order of that day. They were ritually unclean. That meant they were not allowed in the Temple. They were not allowed to be anywhere near where God’s presence was most felt.

But, in Luke’s story, these unclean men were invited by God to the true Temple, the manger, where God’s presence was incarnated in the baby Jesus. There were no priests or Pharisees at the manger, only these ragamuffin shepherds.

All that is important if we are going to understand the story Luke is telling. But, tonight, we are going to go in a little different direction. Tonight we are going to focus on Christmas as a

celebration of gift giving. I am indebted to Will Willimon, a Methodist Bishop from Alabama, for much of what follows.

We have always heard it is more blessed to give than to receive. We have bought that hook, line, and sinker. It is also easier to give than to receive. We feel good giving gifts. We like the image of ourselves as generous gift givers. Receiving makes us uncomfortable. We'll look at that in a moment.

First, we need to see how this preferring to give than to receive gets in the way of our celebration of Christmas. Willimon says we have been influenced by Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* more than we have by the gospels when it comes to understanding Christmas.

Dickens' story is all about a miser who is turned into a repentant gift giver. He catches the Christmas spirit and learns the wonder and pleasure of gift giving. That is fine, as far as it goes, but it misses the main point of Christmas.

Luke says the whole point of Christmas is about God giving us the gift of Jesus. At Christmas we have to get beyond our discomfort being receivers and accept God's gift to us. That will take some work.

Every gift, says Willimon, comes with a claim on us. If someone gives us a gift, we need to reciprocate. We don't want to be in a position of owing someone a favor. We know if we don't reciprocate that person has made a claim on us by their gift. That gives the other, in some senses, power over us.

We even teach our children this. We don't want them to accept an expensive gift from their boyfriend or girlfriend. We tell them they need to return that expensive sweater or piece of jewelry right now. To accept it is to accept the claim their friend has on their life. We don't like the position this puts our children. It gives more weight to the relationship than we feel is appropriate at their age.

So, too, God's gift of Jesus comes with a claim on our lives. To accept that gift is to let God into our lives on a deep level. It is to promise to live by different standards than our culture promotes. It is to see the world, and others, through God's eyes. It reminds us our very lives are a gift from God we dare not take for granted.

The fact that Jesus was placed in a manger by his parents that first Christmas night is critical to Luke's story about receiving a gift. The manger is where animals fed on the hay provided. Luke is hinting that by the time we get to the end of his story we will see that Jesus is the bread of life upon which we feed. Jesus is the gift that nurtures our lives each time we take communion. We do not truly live by what we provide for ourselves. We live because we are nurtured by the bread God offers us in Jesus.

Mary, at the end of our passage for tonight, is seen treasuring and pondering the significance of the words told to her by the shepherds. It is going to take some work for her to understand the meaning of this gift of new life into her life.

So, too, as we take communion this night, we are encouraged to treasure and ponder the significance of Christmas, of God's presence with us as God comes to us in the gentleness and vulnerability of a baby. God continues to come to us this day in the flesh and blood of our lives, in the ordinariness of our days, in the people we encounter, in the love shown to us by our family and friends. That presence may surprise us. We may even miss it. But if we treasure and ponder the meaning of that first Christmas, we will look at our world with the eyes of faith and see God hidden there. Merry Christmas. Amen