

The Fourth Sunday of Advent 2018
“What We Give Depends on What/Whom We Have Received”
 Rev. Dr. Meagan Boozer

On the first Sunday of Advent we were challenged with this thought: What we are looking for during this season of Advent and Christmas will determine what we see. If we are looking for chaos, we'll see chaos. If we are looking for greed, we'll see greed. If we are looking for trouble in the family, we will see the trouble in the family. If we are looking for peace, we will see peace. If we are looking for love, we will see love. If we are looking for hope, we will see hope. If we are looking for ways to be joyful, we will see ways to be joyful. I feel certain you see that we added two new things to aid in our worship since the last sermon. We added the purple cloth, representing Christ's royalty as the King of all kings, and we added the manger which we are going to talk about today. But I also want to point out the gold ribbon that streams down from the top of each tree. This is not just a decoration. These were placed there to represent God's glory coming down to earth in the person of Jesus Christ. What we are looking for determines what we see.

On the second Sunday of Advent we thought about this: How we prepare for Christmas depends on for what or for whom we are preparing. Are we preparing just for a one day or several hour "event" when some packages are opened, or a meal is shared? Or are we preparing the way of the Lord in these days? Is what we are doing and saying opening the way for the Lord to come into a situation you're facing, or a friend is facing? Are we helping to soften a heart towards the One who came to seek and save? How we prepare depends on for what or for whom we are preparing. How's it going so far?

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, please open our eyes to what you know we need to see and open our hearts to what you know we need to receive. We are here, and we are still. Break our resistance. Crumble our pride. This we pray in Jesus' name, Amen.

In the small group my husband John is leading this Advent season they have been engaging in the study by Lee Strobel (who wrote *The Case for Christ*) entitled *The Case for Christmas*. The titles of the sessions were: 1) Setting the Record Straight; 2) Beneath the Fake News; 3) A Mind-Boggling Proposition; and 4) The Prophetic Fingerprint. The point of Strobel's new study is to investigate the story of Jesus' birth by uncovering the evidence that clearly supports the Bible's accounts. In a day and age in which receiving something 'only' by faith is very hard for the growing number of skeptics among us, this study is a much-needed and welcome addition to our library for the maturing of our faith.

One part of the story of Jesus' birth that Strobel addresses is the notion of Jesus being born in a manger in a cattle stall. Is this true? I mean, that's what we've been shown in pageants and movies and artwork across the centuries, right? But is it true – and if it isn't – does it matter?

Well, the truth does matter. It has always mattered. Truth matters. So, to begin let's listen to the biblical account of the story of Christ's birth from Luke 2:1-7. I'm going to read it first from my red Bible that I received from my church when I was 9 years old (1966). This is the Revised Standard Version translation: *"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. ²This was the first enrollment, when Quirin' i-us was governor of Syria. ³And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city. ⁴And 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, ⁵to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered. ⁷And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*

From this, over the centuries, we have been given dramatizations in pageants, classic artwork, and movies that put Jesus' birth in a barn out back of an inn that had no vacancy. Right? That's the picture we have in our heads. Why? Because of these words: *....and laid him in*

a manger. A manger is an animal feeding trough – and so it makes perfect sense then to jump to the conclusion that Mary delivered the baby in a barn, because he was laid in a manger. There was no room in the inn, the baby was laid in a manger, and so therefore, he had to have been born out back in a barn, a cattle stall, a stable.

The Greek word translated ‘inn’ is *kataluma* and can refer to a hotel-like residence, but it can also mean simply a lodging place. Many houses in that day had a wooden or stone feeding trough inside for the animals that were brought in on the coldest nights. It is quite possible, and probable that Jesus was born in a house, in a lower floor due to the over-crowding caused by the census, and therefore because it was the lower floor, that’s where the animals were brought in during the night.

Does this matter enough that we should change our pageant? Well, remember if we are going to be biblically accurate, our boys should be both the angels and the shepherds because all the angels we read about in the Bible are male. Does this mean we should be thrown into a special jail for people who misrepresent the biblical account? (haha). I don’t think so. We are doing our best to tell the story while giving all the children a part to play.

Interestingly, in the last 10-15 years, biblical translators (because of having a greater understanding of cultural and historical context through recent archeological finds) have altered verse 7 in Luke 2. Instead of printing, “*And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*” My 2011 New International Version translated that verse this way, “*She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*” It gives a bit of a different picture, I think, hopefully one that is more historically accurate.

It is important to be informed. It is important to know the facts (as much as is possible). But the main point, friends, is not whether Jesus was born in a barn or a cave or in a downstairs room in a hotel, or a family member’s home, because it all conjures up the same image: an image of humble beginnings. An image of messy beginnings. An image of ‘this is not how I thought it would be’ beginnings for Mary and Joseph. An image of simplicity. An image of the common man, the common woman, making do with what has been provided, and being grateful and gracious as “heaven came down and glory filled their souls.”

Was it the way it was supposed to be? By faith I believe it was. God meant to break into the brokenness of this world in a way that we could relate to. Not in a way that was exclusionary. He came to a messed-up world and was laid in a hard, cold and dirty manger, most likely made of stone not of wood.

Sort of like our hearts sometimes. Hard, cold, and dirtied by anger, unforgiveness, bitterness, sexual immorality, abuse, addiction, words that curse not bless, dirtied by the lies we tell and the apathy towards God we show when we say, “Do you want to go to church today or not?” a heart dirtied by a sense of pride that thinks “I’m better than you.” A manger is hard, cold, and dirtied. Just like our hearts. My heart. Your heart. The hearts of all humanity. Rich. Poor. Black. White. Everyone.

Jesus came to be born into hearts like ours. No matter how hard, cold, or dirty. No matter what you’ve done or thought or not done or not thought. He came to be born into hearts like ours. This is not a myth. It is not a fairy tale meant to make us feel better. Jesus came. It’s an historical fact. He was born in Bethlehem just as the prophets had said 800 years before. He came to be born into hearts like ours. And no matter how many years you’ve been coming to church and sitting in a pew, if you haven’t allowed Jesus to be born anew in your heart, you’re just going through the motions – and you’re missing out. You’re missing out! Because when he comes, when you let him bring new life to your heart and are born anew not of flesh and blood but born of God – everything important changes. Everything important changes from the inside out. A hard heart begins to soften, a cold heart begins to warm, a dirty heart begins to shine – all because of the sudden appearance and presence of Christ as it was for Mary and for Joseph who became grateful and gracious as “heaven came down and glory filled their souls.”

God planned it this way from before the beginning of time. Contrary to the belief of the majority of people, Christmas is not when the story of Christ began. Christ has always been. Christmas is very simply (and I mean that literally) when faith became sight. When Word became flesh. When God became man. When the impossible became possible. When hearts of stone began to be transformed into hearts of flesh.

What you are giving others for Christmas depends on what you have received. What you are giving depends on what you have received. What you are really giving – behind the packages and the cards and the pie – depends on what you have received.

Oh, how I pray for all of us that we have received the fullness of Christ into our hard, cold, and sin-sick, dirtied hearts. How I pray that all of us have been reborn into a life of true faith by the Holy Spirit of God! How I pray that we are all thinking about how our reborn ways can be gently and humbly and joyfully displayed in our gatherings over this next week. How I pray that as it is in heaven, earth will receive her King!

As we prepare to come together in communion this morning, hear with me these final words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his book *Life Together* regarding the Sacrament of Holy Communion. Bonhoeffer ministered faithfully to and for God during the Nazi years in Germany in many ways but specifically as a leader and teacher and pastor in a unique Christian community in an underground seminary. *“The day of the Lord’s Supper is an occasion of joy for the Christian community. Reconciled in their hearts with God and the brethren, the congregation receives the gift of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, and, receiving that, it receives forgiveness, new life, and salvation. It is given new fellowship with God and men. The fellowship of the Lord’s Supper is the superlative fulfillment of Christian fellowship. As the members of the congregation are united in body and blood at the table of the Lord so will they be together in eternity. Here the community has reached its goal. Here joy in Christ and his community is complete.”*

Every week during Advent this year we have shared communion together. There was a sense of need, a desired fellowship with Christ and with one another that prompted the weekly sacrament - making tangible the intangible. There was a yearning for stillness in our preparations for Christ’s coming. There was a rejection of autonomy and an embracing of community. In receiving this sacrament more often this season, I pray we have been more prepared to see what God wants us to see, more prepared to be about the mission of preparing the way of the Lord wherever we are and whoever we are with, and more eager to give what truly matters. Bonhoeffer said, *“Here (meaning at the Table) joy in Christ and his community is complete.”*

Christmas is all about Jesus Christ and the gift of his life for ours. And so, as a congregation on this last Sunday of Advent, may our joy be complete as we receive what our hearts so desperately need. May we receive Christ and all he came to give.

Let us pray: Heavenly Father, thank you for your mercy. Thank you for your love. Thank you for your patience. Thank you for hearing our prayers. We have allowed ourselves to get hung up on the smallest things. We have chosen to look for things that do not honor you. We have chosen to embrace frustrations. We have chosen poorly. You came to save us from the schemes of the devil to keep us out of relationship with you. And we have turned to our own way, seeking to save ourselves and others by our own means and on our own terms. Forgive us. Forgive us for our fears, our worries, our doubts, and our unforgiveness of others. Forgive us for not trusting you. We choose in this moment to forgive, to let go, to receive peace and to receive your forgiveness. (silence). Help us to come to this meal with grateful and generous hearts, filled with the glory of Christ. This we pray in Jesus’ name, Amen.

Friends, for the JOY set before him, Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame – dying for you and for me so that we might have life. So that we might have peace. Know that by his wounds you are healed. You are forgiven. You are freed! Thanks be to God!

Joy to the World, the Lord has come! Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room. And Heaven and nature sing, and Heaven and nature sing,
And Heaven, and Heaven, and nature sing. Amen.