

Sermon for Zion Presbyterian Church – September 29, 2019

Hymns: 407 - Praise My Soul The King of Heaven; 268 – All Hail King Jesus;
166 – Once in Royal David’s City; 362 – Jesus, good above all other

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Sermon: “This thing that has happened” - Investigator’s Gospel part 3

Luke 2:1-20

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”

Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests.”*

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”

So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

Christmas is early this year. We are making our way through the Gospel of Luke, in our series “The Investigator’s Gospel,” and since the birth of Jesus happens in Luke chapter 2, Christmas is early this year.

So there’s no tree and no manger and no twinkly lights. You haven’t been shopping for presents and going to parties and drinking egg nog and eating fruitcake. You haven’t been driven mad in the grocery store by canned Christmas music.

And since we haven't got all that baggage distracting us, fun though much of it may be, we can actually focus on the event which Luke relates to us – “this thing that has happened,” as the shepherds put it. Luke sets the stage for it all in Chapter One, but now, in chapter two, it all comes together.

And what Luke tells us is, Jesus was born. Didn't just appear; didn't just float down from heaven on a cloud; isn't a ghost or a spirit or a vision or a dream. He was born. A real baby, to real people, in a real place, in the days of the very real King Herod of Judea, in the empire of very real Caesar Augustus, the very real Jesus was born.

And that birth of that very real baby made a very real difference in our world. *The* very real difference in our world. And to understand just what a difference was made, we have to understand the story. Our story. And it is this:

God created the world. God created the myriad forms of life in our world. And God created human beings, who had the capacity to love. They also had the capacity to choose between right and wrong, between good and evil, and the capacity to choose to love or not to love. It seems, for love to be real, the power to choose not to love needs to be every bit as real.

God chose to love humanity, to be in loving relationship with humanity, to be together with us in our wonderful garden home. But humanity chose differently. We chose power, we chose selfishness, over love.

And since that moment, the story of our world has been the outworking of that power and that selfishness, and how the exercise of power and selfishness has caused unending misery and conflict in our hearts, in our homes, in our communities, in our nations, in our world. Every human misery on a personal to a global level can be traced back to this choice. This choice we keep on making.

But God made a different choice. God chose to pursue that relationship of love and community with us. God was determined to bring us back to himself; God was determined to bring us back home.

Plan one was to give the place a good cleaning and start fresh with Noah and his family. But the poison of our choice had gone too deep. All the water of the flood couldn't wash it from Noah's heart.

Plan two was to begin a new family, a new community, a nation which would inspire by example, would show a different way, would lead the world back into right relationship with God, by spreading justice, mercy, forgiveness and compassion. It was founded with Abraham and Sarah, was continued through Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel, through Joseph and Moses and Miriam and the rest. The nation was blessed with deliverance and a law and a land, setting out how all could live in harmony and peace. “Here are the choices for good,” said God, through Moses. But the choices we made instead were predictable and sad. Power and selfishness again.

Plan three was to make the nation strong, to give it a King after God's own heart. David, the shepherd warrior King, seemed to truly be just such a man, but power and selfishness got the best of him, too, and soon the nation was under the tyranny of a succession of increasingly power-mad and selfish Kings, starting with David's son, the supposedly wise but ultimately disastrous Solomon. The nation struggled on, enduring the pain of a civil war launched by Solomon's successors, experiencing national tragedy and defeat at the hands of the Assyrians and Babylonians, and ultimately being expelled from their promised land to the many corners of the world. The only thing left for the people could do was to hang on to the promise that God hadn't given up on them; hadn't forgotten them; hadn't turned his back and walked away.

God didn't turn his back. God didn't walk away. Instead, God made another plan. A different plan. God made a promise, that from David's broken ancestral line would come a Messiah, a Saviour, a deliverer for all. One who would break the cycle of power and selfishness. One who could teach us forgiveness and grace, mercy and healing, compassion and trust. One who would reflect the very love of God. One who would show us the way back home. That day would come. The Day of the Lord was coming. The Messiah was on his way.

The prophets, over the hundreds of years of waiting, kept the hope alive. *"The Messiah will come... a child to a virgin... born in Bethlehem... a Prince of Peace for all the world... God with us... he will take our suffering upon himself... he will forgive the people of their sins."* And, somehow, somehow, he would lead us back into relationship with God. Back into love. He would lead us home.

And in the midst of our darkness; in the midst of our suffering and loneliness and sorrow and despair; in the midst of our inequality and our struggle and our oppression and our pain; in the midst of our powerlessness and our selfishness and our inability to get it right; in the midst of an empire built on the ruthless application of overwhelming military force, in the midst of a kingdom ruled by a homicidal paranoid, in the dim warmth of a lonely stable, to a frightened stepfather and a first-time mother far, far from home, a baby was born. Our baby was born. Jesus, the Messiah, was born.

And in that birth something amazing happened. In that birth, God chose to be with us, as one of us, seeing as we see, walking where we walk, feeling our hunger, our hurts, our friendships, our rejections, our joys, our griefs. Experiencing our temptations, but, untainted by the scars deep within us all, showing us how power and selfishness are not the only way. Showing us, through how he lived his life, and through how he gave his life, that there is another way. The way of mercy and forgiveness. The way of humility and grace. The way of reaching out to our Father. The way of love.

Because that baby grew to be a man. A man who proclaimed (Luke 4:18-19):

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of

sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

And the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. And he proclaimed the Good News in word and in deed. He taught. He healed. He freed people from their blindness, their diseases, their sin. And he proclaimed the new way to live, the way we were made to live, the way the world was meant to be, the way of the Kingdom of God. Listen (Luke 6:27-38):

"But to you who are listening I say: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone slaps you on one cheek, turn to them the other also. If someone takes your coat, do not withhold your shirt from them. Give to everyone who asks you, and if anyone takes what belongs to you, do not demand it back. Do to others as you would have them do to you.

"If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who are good to you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners do that... But love your enemies, do good to them... Then your reward will be great, and you will be children of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

"Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you."

A different way. A new way. A way not based on power, on jealousy, on suspicion, on revenge. A way not based on greed, on selfishness, on prejudice, on deceit. It is a different way. The way of the Kingdom of God. The way of love.

It is a way so unstoppable, so unquenchable, so strong, that as Jesus proved, death itself cannot diminish it. A way, a life, that is a light in the darkness, and the darkness has not, will not, cannot, put it out.

And when we follow him; when we follow Jesus; when we give him our lives; he puts the light within us, too. And nothing life throws at us can ever take it away.

That's who was born. That's why he was born. And that birth of that very real baby made a very real difference in our world. ***The*** very real difference in our world. The very real difference to ***us***.

That's what we celebrate today, on this early Christmas Sunday. And you're invited. You're invited to be part of the story. You're invited to open your heart to the light of God's love, and grace, and mercy, and forgiveness, and to follow Jesus. God is inviting you home.

"This thing ***has*** happened." Thanks be to God. Amen.