

Tuesday, December 24, 2024

Christmas Eve

Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/612871447859085>

(Sermon begins at about 1:10:45)

“Breaking News”

I really enjoy musical theater. For nearly as long as I can remember, one of my favorite musicals has been “Jesus Christ Superstar,” which first came out when I was about ten. I have a number of favorite songs from the musical. But there is one that, while among my favorites, asks a question that has stayed with me all these years. Near the end, after he commits suicide, the spirit of Judas Iscariot sings the title song for the rock opera: “Superstar.” The song begins with the words:

Every time I look at you
I don't understand
Why you let the things you did
Get so out of hand
You'd have managed better
If you'd had it planned
Now why'd you choose such a backward time
And such a strange land?

If you'd come today
You could have reached a whole nation
Israel in 4 BC
Had no mass communication

Yes, why did God choose Israel in 4 BC as the place and time for the birth of his Son? Israel, little more than a backwater province of the mighty Roman Empire. Bethlehem itself being a relatively insignificant village in this backwater province. And a time that is similarly backwards in many ways. Not least of which, as Judas notes, was the existence of a communications system that was absolutely primitive by our modern standards. If God wanted to get the word out about the greatest event to occur in the history of humanity—the birth of the Messiah, the coming of God in the flesh—surely there were better times and places to make it happen. There are more effective ways to spread your message than by preaching to a crowd here and a crowd there; than relying on a ragtag band of disciples to spread the word after your death; than relying on some stories written by a group of men who never even met Jesus in the flesh. From a public relations perspective, the plan for spreading the word about Jesus and his ministry left a little to be desired.

Maybe Judas had a point. If Jesus, if the Messiah, if the Son of God, had been born in our own time, his birth would have certainly been breaking news. The major news outlets would have

descended upon Bethlehem and the surrounding area. All jockeying for candid shots of the Holy Family. All seeking interviews with Joseph, with Mary, with the innkeeper, with any of the shepherds who heard the angels' announcement. There would probably even be interviews with Mary's childhood friend from Nazareth: "there was always something special about Mary." The event, along with in-depth analysis, and speculations as to what this all means by a variety of experts real and self-proclaimed would be broadcast around the world in real time.

Although, given the way our modern news cycles go, the story of the breaking news about God coming into our midst in the form of a baby would undoubtedly run on endless loops for the better part of a day, maybe a little more. But in the blink of an eye, we would be on to the next news event to capture the media's attention: the latest government to collapse, the latest cabinet pick by the president-elect, or the latest scandal. After all, when it comes to breaking news, we have a limited attention span. We get sucked in and engrossed in the initial hype, but quickly grow bored and want to move on to the latest breaking news. The previous breaking news event a fading, distant memory. Then where would God's grand plan be?

That is one scenario. Another would be that the world actually took notice of the earth-shattering event that had occurred. The birth of the Son of God. God actually coming to Earth as a flesh and blood person. With the right hype, the right spin, people from all over the world would be flocking to Bethlehem to see for themselves. The Holy Family would not be able to find a moment's peace. There would need to be round-the-clock security. They would need a complete staff of assistants, public relations professionals, and security personnel just to help them navigate life as the biggest celebrity to hit the stage. Move over Taylor Swift, there's a new kid in town. Because of all the attention, all the attempts by the masses to get to Jesus, his life growing up would be far from normal.

So while Judas in "Jesus Christ Superstar" had a valid point that there may have been better times and places for Jesus to be born, for God to come into our midst, would the whole venture have really been more successful? Depending on circumstances, it could have ended up flopping. It could have ended up virtually forgotten before it even had a chance to begin. All in all, things did not turn out too badly, success-wise. After all, here we are, 2,000 years later, celebrating the birth of God's Son. Here the Church is, 2,000 years later, the largest religion in the world, reaching every corner of the globe, influencing untold aspects of our culture and secular society.

Maybe, just maybe, God knew what he was doing when he picked Israel in 4 BC to make his incarnational entrance on the world stage. Because, all-in-all, the results have been pretty successful in the long run—a few missteps and bumps along the way notwithstanding. No, the choice of when and where were not about how to achieve immediate success. Rather, it was about achieving maximum success. To make sure that all of humanity could relate to and experience what God had to offer: his love.

God did not come in the flesh to be the subject of breaking news. He did not come to be the next celebrity superstar—with all due respect to the title of the 1970s rock opera. The whole purpose of the Incarnation was not about creating some global enterprise called the Church. It was about God seeking to be in relationship with us in a more intimate way. In a way that was

not possible when God was merely viewed as some distant, all-powerful entity. Despite God's best efforts at working with and making himself known through human intermediaries, that was not enough. We humans are relational people. We need relationships to survive and to thrive. With each other and with our God. But for us, the most effective way to develop and maintain truly meaningful relationship is face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh.

That is what the Incarnation—God coming in the flesh in the form of Jesus—was meant to be. God's attempt to deepen and strengthen relationship with his people through that face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh contact. As to when and where that occurred, God could have chosen any time, any place to come in the flesh through the birth of his Son. We will probably never completely figure that one out. Although the prevailing conditions, what we hear in tonight's Gospel, do give a pretty good indication of why Israel in 4 BC was a good choice. Providing a context in which God could achieve what he hoped to. To send the message that he was God for all people. Not just for the rich and powerful. Not just for the elite. No, this was a God for all people, seeking to be in relationship with all people.

Just look at the conditions under which Jesus, the Son of God was born. Not in a clean, sanitary hospital, but in a stable. The home of dirty, smelly animals. The newborn child wrapped in bands of cloth, probably not the cleanest, and placed in a manger—a feeding trough for animals. These were pretty bad conditions, certainly not normal circumstances for a human baby to come into the world. While not the normal living conditions for Mary and Joseph, probably not too far removed from how many others were forced to live. Particularly in a land ruled by oppressive foreign occupiers bent on abusing the land and its people for their own purposes. That was how our God chose to come in the flesh into his Creation. In conditions that could only charitably be called humble. More accurately called deplorable. Conditions in which the majority of his people would likely never—hopefully never—have to experience. God coming into the world in such a way that he could experience what the poorest and most destitute of his beloved children experience. That is who our God is. That is who our God chooses to be. Not high and mighty, removed from his Creation. Rather, in humble conditions, in solidarity with his beloved children.

Who this God is, what and who this God values, is also conveyed in how the birth of God's Son is announced. Or rather, to whom it is announced. Again, not trumpeted from the rooftops to the masses. Not in carefully worded press releases. Not announced to the elite. No, the birth of God's Son, of God in the flesh, was announced to shepherds. To those who were viewed by society of the day as being the lowest of the low. People who lived on the margins: geographically in the fields outside of towns and villages, and socially in terms of status. The angels delivering a powerful message to these outcast and marginalized members of society: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for ALL the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." A powerful message delivered to those considered the least among the people. Again, this is who our God is. Not concerned with social protocols. Not concerned with pandering to the elite, to the powerful and wealthy. Instead, more concerned with letting those who society would just as soon forget that they are worthy of receiving the greatest news ever delivered. That they are just as worthy of God's love as anyone else.

This is the good news of this day. That God has chosen to come among us, in the flesh. That God has come to us in the form of his Son, Jesus. Born into human form under the most humble of circumstances, so as to be in solidarity with us, no matter who we are, no matter what we are experiencing, no matter what we have ever had to endure. And that birth, in its most humble and lowly of conditions, was announced to those who were similarly considered the most lowly. A message that no matter who we are, regardless of status, wealth, power, or lack thereof, we are all worthy of receiving the news. The good news of great joy for all people—for ALL people—that to us is born this day, in the city of David, a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

After the shepherds visited the newborn Jesus in the manger at Bethlehem and told Mary and Joseph what they had been told by the angel, we are told that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” This Christmas season, may we ponder in our hearts the meaning of our Savior’s birth, the meaning of the angel’s message to the shepherds, what that means to us as children of God, and what that means for us in our own relationships with Emmanuel, God with us. I assure you, that will be far more profound and meaningful, and far more enduring, than any breaking news could possibly provide.

Merry Christmas.