

Love is the first Gift of Christmas

November 29, 2009

Happy New Year! Today marks the beginning of another Christian calendar. The Christian calendar rotates differently from the actual calendar. No one uses it to keep the days of the year, but the church year is marked by the life of Christ. It begins with the season of Advent, which begins today with the lighting of the first advent candle. This season continues through the four Sunday's prior to Christmas...each Sunday building toward the coming of Christ. Each Sunday adding more and more light, as though the dawn is breaking, until finally the Son rises in the birth of Jesus and light breaks into the cold, dark world. Jesus called himself the light of the world, and his coming illuminates the heart of God. The Christian calendar continues with the 12 days of Christmas, which end in Epiphany or Kings day...which is still celebrated in a large part of the world. In much of Latin America, that is when children get their presents. Epiphany is about revelation and understanding, the coming of the wise men and our coming to truly know who Christ is. Epiphany goes until Lent, the season of preparing for Easter. Lent is a season of gathering preparation, of discipline and prayer. It used to focus on being astir and full of self discipline...giving up something and fasting to join in Christ's suffering. Then comes Easter, the season of victory and celebration. Christ is Risen, he is Risen indeed! Afterwards is Pentecost, the time of the Spirit...blowing in the church and each of it's members with power! Giving us gifts to use for his glory to build the kingdom of God and become all that we can be as his children! Then a Kingdومتide, where we celebrate the coming Kingdom of Christ...both on earth and in heaven.

And then back to were we started. The cycle continues over and over and over. You might think that as a preacher, I get bored with the same topic over and over again, year after year. It's Christmas again! Here we go again...but NO, I don't. I love Christmas, and I love it's message!

Christmas is important to the Gospel message! It sets the stage for who Jesus is and why he came, and it is a miniature Gospel in itself....as is so much of Jesus' life! So let's take a moment today to begin the journey of Christmas.

The key player in Christmas as to be Mary. And the key theme...Love.

Now in the protestant churches we have tended to make less of Mary because the Roman Catholic Church has made so much of her, and that has been wrong. We have not given her her due. Think of the story of Christmas from her perspective. She is a young girl, perhaps as young as 14 years old, but most likely somewhere around 15 or most likely 16 years of age. That is marrying age where she lived. And before you think ill of them, it was marrying age in parts of this country not too long ago too. My grandmother married my grandfather at the age of 15, and had my mother at age 16...in the Appalachian mountains and it was just what most people there did. Mary was engaged to a nice fellow named Joseph. We learn of Joseph from Matthew's account. There are only two Gospel writers who deal with the birth of Christ. John deals with Jesus' as the eternal Word before time began who came into the world...but Matthew and Luke both deal with Jesus' birth. Matthew from Joseph's perspective and Luke from Mary's. Luke gets the story from Mary herself, who else would know these details? So Mary was engaged to a kind and gentle and good man who cared about her. And along comes an angel.

The Angel Gabriel, who stands in the very presence of God himself! An awe inspiring figure of power and light, who's usual first greeting is "do not be afraid!" comes to visit Mary. And what a visit. Hail favored one, the Lord is with you! Do not be afraid. YOU have found favor with God. You will be with Child and give birth to a son, and you will give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

What must have gone through Mary's mind. Found favor with God? What does God do with those who he doesn't like? Mary's only questions have to do with how this is all going to happen...they are honest logistical questions...since she is still a virgin. How is it all going to happen? Gabriel does not really explain it, but says that the power of God will take care of it...that with God all things are possible, and gives her the example of her elderly cousin Elizabeth, who is now with child (John the Baptist).

And Mary does not bat an eye. She simply says yes to God. Wow. It is an incredible amount of faith. Now an angel of light did appear to her and talk to her. Something that is pretty remarkable. But her whole life it to be turned upside down, and I mean forever. Once you have a child, it is forever. What will her parents think? It is interesting that we never hear of them in the Gospels...did they disown her? Likely. We know that Joseph took her as his wife and she went to live with him. Was she an outcast in her village? Mary did not know if Joseph would reject her. If she would ever be able to marry and have a normal life...but she knew that God's messiah, the great savior of the world was coming and she had a chance to be part of God's great act of salvation...and she said yes. Simply and faithfully, yes. Did she know all it would mean? No, of course not. But she trusted God to lead and guide and protect her as she was faithful in following him.

The second thing about this story is God's action. God chooses to come into the world as an act of love. He does so not in a bolt of lightning or a clap of thunder or in a cloud where all can see. But in a simple birth...like all of us. To a simple girl from a simple village in a small country...ordinary people. Not royalty. Not rich. Not special except for their faith and trust and love. He comes because he loves us so. He reaches out to the world and embraces us. Have you noticed that love reaches out? when you love someone, you reach out to them...or you should. Especially when they are in trouble. When they fail or fall, that is when they need us most as friends and family.

And that is when God reaches out to us the most. God chooses to come into our world completely, holding nothing back. Being born a human being. Fully human, yet fully divine. We have all failed and fallen. We are all sinners who have fallen short of the glory of God, but yet God does not wait for us to clean up our act before he acts. He does not wait for us to make the first move. He does not wait for us to do anything...God takes the initiative out of supreme love and comes to us in Jesus Christ. The Bible says that Jesus came out of love. That God demonstrated his great love for us in that while we continued to sin, Christ came and Christ died.

God so loved the world, we are told, that he sent his only begotten son...he did not just love the world, he SO LOVED IT. He so loved it that he gave his son...to the whole world. Not just to one group or people. He came that who so ever that believes in him might have life...that whoever believes in him might be saved. We can not save ourselves, we are saved by his grace and his love...it is the gift of God; we do not earn it or deserve it. That is such good news...especially for ME! Wow!

God so loved the world, and me, that he gave his only begotten son, that who so ever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.

That last verse is one that many churches seem to have forgotten. God did not send Jesus into the world to condemn it. Nor did he send Jesus to condemn any group of people that you somehow have decided don't measure up or meet your criteria for being "Christian" or good Christians.

This is God's midnight madness sale at Christmas! The original 3:00am doorbuster sale! The shepherds heard the news and came to see in the dark of night...unto you...the lonely, the lost, the alone, the downtrodden, the sinner, the outcast, the holier than thou, the too righteous for my own good, the ordinary, everyday person, unto you this day is born a savior, who is Christ the Lord.

Love was the gift that God gave that first Christmas to the whole world, and it's light still burns bright. For God still so loves the world...