

Why We Are Here

Luke 20:1-14

December 24, 2010

I.

On occasions such as this, we might ask why we are here. This is not Sunday morning, and for some of us it's already past our bedtime. So why aren't we home, or someplace else? There are a couple of answers.

One answer is simple. It's Christmas Eve. We're celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Churches have been doing this on this evening for centuries.

But that doesn't really address my question. I did not ask why the church is having a service, but rather why each of us is sitting here right now. And that answer probably is more complicated because it rests somewhere in our hearts, or our hopes, or our faith.

Perhaps it has been a good year and we're here to give thanks. Or perhaps we're here for reasons described in the classic lyrics from Simon and Garfunkel. We're empty and aching and we don't know why. Or maybe we're somewhere in between. And so we come to search for truth, or to dispel doubts, or simply to know God again, or for the first time.

And a few of you probably are here under a little duress. You're here because someone in your family, or a friend, prevailed upon you to come, and if the truth be told you would rather be somewhere else, doing something different.

But for those who had doubts or were reluctant, the fact that you decided to be here says something. Perhaps it says that deep within your spirit, after we put aside all the jokes about coming to church on Christmas Eve and Easter, you want to hear the story one more time. Perhaps you want to believe that all this religion business is not just something people made up in the distant past. Perhaps you hope there is more to Christmas than the glitter of the malls.

And finally, many of us are here because we're always here. This is our home. We're here on Sundays, and we're here whenever the doors are open for worship. We want once again to experience God and his only Son, to receive the love he offers, and to share that love with others.

So in this sense, we could be here for many different reasons. But I would ask a hypothetical question. In addition to our own individual reasons for coming tonight, what if we all had to agree on just one more reason that would be the same for all of us? Is there one thing about Jesus Christ that would draw everyone through the doors this evening?

II.

Let's explore that idea from another angle. Imagine, for a moment, what the world would be like, and what our lives would be like right now, if Jesus had not been born and had not carried out his ministry and God's will among us.

The most obvious difference would be that we would not be here. This building would not even exist. There would be no Christian church anywhere in the world. The good things the church has done to help people would not have happened. The faith that sustains us would not be part of the human experience. This probably would be just another ordinary evening.

And the United States as we know it would not exist. There would have been no pilgrims to come to the New World to exercise their religious freedoms. Everything would be different. Without the spirit of Jesus' goodness and love, the world most likely still would be run by dictators and tyrants.

That's the way it was two thousand years ago when Jesus was born into a Roman Empire that ruled the world with an iron fist. And without the transforming influence of Christianity, that empire or some stronger successor still could be in control. If you recall Star Trek characters, we might well be living in a society not much different from that of the Klingons.

But thankfully that is not what happened. Through God's grace Jesus was born, and an unquenchable light began to shine in the darkness of the world. And tonight we celebrate that light, and the peace and hope it offers.

III.

This brings us back to my earlier question. What single thing might draw us together tonight? Well, one easy answer is in the reading we just heard. The angel told the shepherds that Jesus would be the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. But we also celebrate that on Good Friday and Easter. This is Christmas Eve. Is there anything that might make tonight unique?

I would suggest that we look not only to the fact of Jesus' birth, but also to the circumstances surrounding it. And sometimes we miss that message. Sometimes we hear the words, but the words don't leave an impression. Here's an example I have used before to make that point.

I was born many years ago in Dayton, Ohio, which calls itself "The Birthplace of Aviation" because it also was the home of Wilbur and Orville Wright. And as you probably recall, the Wright brothers were the first people to actually fly an airplane.

On December 17, 1903, on the beaches of Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, Wilbur and Orville got their plane airborne for twelve seconds of controlled flight. When they finished Wilbur rushed to the telegraph office with a message to their hometown newspaper in Dayton. The message said "We have flown our plane for the first powered flight in history, and will be home for Christmas."

Of course, they expected a front page story in the local paper about what they had achieved. They anticipated a big headline that said "Wright Brothers Fly!" or something similar. But when the paper came out the next day there was no front page story at all. Instead, there was only a brief article on page nine with a small headline that said "Wright Brothers Home for Christmas."

Strictly speaking, the newspaper was accurate, but it had missed the biggest story of the year. In the same way it's possible to overlook some important things about this story of Jesus' birth.

IV.

So let's go back to that Christmas story and look not at the literal words of Jesus' birth, but rather the details in the background. And those details have meaning.

Jesus was born in a barn and slept in a manger. It happened in a small obscure province far from the seats of world power. The only people there were Mary and Joseph, an ordinary young couple no one knew. No advance preparations had been made, and the first visitors were lowly shepherds, who were at the bottom of society's pecking order.

Now, God could have arranged for his Son to be born however he wanted. Jesus could have been born in a warm cozy room with family and friends waiting nearby. But God chose this way. And those dismal circumstances foreshadowed how his work would identify him with the oppressed and powerless, the poor and needy, and those who have little and exist on the margins of life.

Most of us here tonight are reasonably comfortable and well-off. And sometimes we can be tempted to measure our own lives by looking at those who have more than we do rather than those who have less. And that is OK. God wants us to strive for comfort and security.

But God also wants us to understand why the miracle in the manger in Bethlehem happened in the way that it did, and what it means. Jesus came to give his love to all of us, but he spent most of his time ministering to people living in conditions like those of his own birth.

That means that Jesus calls us to do his work today in the same places as he worked when he was among us. And some of those places are right here in Hancock County.

People who live among us walk into the church office just about every day for help with the basics of life. Mothers feed their kids canned goods heated with propane lighters because they cannot pay their electric bills. Fathers and brothers with no medical care conceal their sickness and injuries just to stay on back-breaking jobs that barely pay the rent.

I once visited a church that actively helped those in need. As I approached the church from the parking lot I noticed a sign hanging over the front door that said "Servants' Entrance." And when I left the church after the service I noticed there was another message on the back of the sign for those of us walking out. It said "You Are Now Entering the Mission Field."

The truth of both of those messages applies to us all. Jesus' birth means that we, like him, are to be servants in the Christian sense. And his birth reaffirms that there is a mission field that needs tending. Through his birth and the example of his life he calls us to care for those in the community who do not have our blessings.

V.

And so, we come to church tonight to celebrate the birth of our Savior. We come to sit in this sanctuary and renew our faith. We come to hear the familiar music, and to see the beautiful decorations, and to receive communion. Those are all good things, and are pleasing to God.

But we also come to understand once again what it means to be a Christian. The church not only brings us together, but also sends us out, into the world, to do the work that God has given us to do. That is the answer to my earlier question. I pray that, in addition to our many reasons for being here tonight, a sense of mission would be one reason upon which we all would agree.

As we go home tonight and finish our preparations, and as we get up tomorrow and share wonderful moments with our families and friends, let us not forget the background of this Gospel story. How can we be shepherds? How can we help those who have no place to turn.

And we should remember that it all began in a manger. From that lowly and humble beginning the world was changed. As we honor Jesus Christ here in his church, we also are called into the community to carry on his work. *Amen.*