

## **December 13 – Third Sunday of Advent**

Children, Go Where I send Thee

Where are we Going?

Luke 2:1-7

From the beginning of slavery in this country laws were enacted to restrict the movement of those enslaved. By singing “Children, Go Where I Send Thee” the slaves were freed to move in their spirits and follow the commandment of Jesus to go and make disciples. They wanted to stand up to the rules that said they were property and had no choice in what they did or where they went. Even more, the song subversively taught and allowed them to practice counting. What does this song of movement say to us today? In part I see it as a reminder of how powerful is the pull to find freedom and safety that is within all of us. We see many today risking their lives for freedom as they flee the ravages of war that is occurring in the Middle East. We will talk more about its message for us but again we need to hear a bit of the context under which the slaves, who created this song, were living.

The first Fugitive Slave Act was signed into law in 1793 as part of the U.S. Constitution by President George Washington. It authorized local governments to operate across state lines in order to seize and return escaped slaves to those claiming to own them. This unjust law would produce abuses as happened in the kidnapping of Solomon Northrup whose life was detailed in “12 Years a Slave.” These laws were strengthened in 1850 with the second Fugitive Slave Act. In the midst of oppression, suppression, and repression, Africans in America continued to watch, wait, and hope for freedom by creating songs that expressed the ability to go.

There is an older version of this carol than the popular one sung by the choir. Its words, though similar, bring a different word of challenge for us. Both begin with one for the little bitty baby born in Bethlehem. Joseph had no choice in going to Bethlehem. Caesar ordered a census and it was decreed that all would return to their ancestral home to be counted. Joseph decided to take his very pregnant wife with him instead of leaving her at home. Was Mary shunned in the village because of her unexpected

pregnancy? It makes you wonder since her going with Joseph would not be the usual course of action for that time.

Just think for a moment what kind of disruption such an edict would cause today? Where is your ancestral home in this country? Many of us would not really have a clear answer. For me I wonder if it is one of the parsonages we lived in as my dad served churches in the Northwest. Or is it the town in Montana where I was born but a place my family lived for just a few years? Is it the small farming community in Nebraska near where my great grandfather homesteaded in the 1800's? Is it Boston, the first city in the United States where some of my ancestors set foot on American soil? Imagine how you would feel to have to follow a law like that. Imagine how Joseph felt needing to leave his work bench and go to Bethlehem just because Caesar decreed it.

But he goes to Bethlehem, which means "The House of Bread" and there the "Bread of Life" was born, born, born in Bethlehem. Where do we seek for the bread of life today? Do we, in our journeys of life acknowledge God is with us on the journey and embrace the life-giving joy we might find, or do we just go along angrily resenting what we are forced to do? This song of joy reminds us that life is found in and at the end of the journey, even ones not of our choosing.

The second verse talks about Joseph and Mary. They lived in Nazareth according to Luke. This was a community on the margin. Galilee was not a respected part of Palestine and Nazareth was a little backwater place. Remember what Nathaniel said when told Jesus was from Nazareth. He said, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Where do we discount people because of where they are from? In the days of the song people might ask, "Could anything good come from the slave quarters?" Yet we know that people like Frederick Douglas, Harriet Tubman and George Washington Carver were born in those slave quarters. Who do we discount today because of where they are from? Some today are disparaging Muslims. There is also a huge pushback concerning Syrian refugees. Politicians want to label them all potential terrorists. One of the interesting things that has come from this discussion is a reminder that the founder of Apple, Steve Jobs' biological father was from Syria. Steve was adopted and raised by

others but still, can anything good from Syria, or the ghettos, or reservations, or housing projects...? This song challenges those quick judgements.

The next two verses are about the good old wise men and the shepherds. It is a musical retelling of the nativity story and so we won't spend time on it today as we have looked at some of the issues of wise men and shepherds earlier.

Now we come to verse five for the animals in the stall. Luke's account says the baby Jesus used their feed box for his bed. We are so enamored with the cuteness of the story that we have long ago let its challenge slip away. What I mean is that when we read this part of the Christmas story we tend to think of all those Sunday School plays where young girls hold dolls, and young boys in ill-fitting bath robes kneel before the holy family and we just smile. This is a story of revolution, one that the earliest readers understood, and one that the slaves understood.

Jesus' family was poor. Now I am not saying they were the poorest of the poor but a tradesman in those days made barely enough to keep their family fed from day to day. Their's was a hand to mouth, existence. Rarely did they have any extra to put away for an emergency. Having to travel all the way to Bethlehem would have taxed their meager resources. We hear that they had to spend the night in a stable because there was no room in the inn, and this is true, but it would only be true for someone without money. If you had enough coins in your purse, a room, either in an inn or private home, would have been procured. Many of the slave homes were so poorly built that small animals and critters came and went from their places. They would know what it was to put a baby to sleep surrounded by animals. They would know Mary and Joseph's worry about whether or not the baby would be safe or get bitten by a rodent at night. To sing about animals at the birth is a reminder to us that there are still children around the world, and even more shockingly here in Clallam County who don't have a safe place to lay their head when they go to sleep tonight. This song should challenge us to be advocates both here and around the world for the children.

Finally we have six stars that shone so bright. This, for me, is a reminder that God is at work in the worst of situations bringing hope. I am sure that Mary was feeling

very alone and vulnerable that night. Having shepherds arrive would not have eased her anxiety, at least at first. But when she heard their stories about the angels appearing to them proclaiming the birth, then she would have begun to take courage. It would mean the dreams or visitations that she and Joseph had experienced were true. And when the wise men arrived telling of a great star that had led them to the boy, she would realize that she was never alone. God was with her. In Matthew the gifts of the Magi were used, at least in part, to help them flee from Herod. That gold was needed to make the journey possible. God was with them.

For the slaves singing about the stars in the sky would remind them of the Polar Star that was, for many of them, a symbol of hope and freedom. The Christmas story was a reminder that God cared about those who were poor, oppressed, and needing to be free. For us it is a reminder that no matter what we are going through, we are not alone. God knows our struggles, our fears and our hopes. God is giving us guidance to a better future. All this because of a little bitty baby born, born, born in Bethlehem.