

December 24 – Christmas Eve

A King's Bed

Luke 2:1-20

During the season of Advent we have been looking at various African American Spirituals and learning from them anew the messages, hopes and challenges that are part of this season. Advent asks us to look back and remember and celebrate the miracle of Jesus's birth. We have done this when singing about shepherds and wise men and a baby born in a manger. But Advent also asks us to look forward, to that time when Jesus returns. It is a season of challenge where we are asked what we can do to make his vision of peace and justice for all a reality today. African American spirituals provide an excellent medium by which to cross the divide between the first and second coming of Christ. The songs of the slaves celebrating the birth of Jesus point us back but their longing for freedom and justice are still a challenge today.

One of my favorite spirituals is Sweet Little Jesus Boy that we heard sung tonight. It begins talking about sweet little Jesus boy, born in a manger. This, for me connects us to one of the all-time favorite carols of the season, "Away in a Manger." We sang it tonight as we invited the children to come forward to hear their story. Yet, when you think about it, the idea that Jesus had to be born in a manger is outrageous! We can sing all we want about cattle lowering the baby to sleep but not one of us would choose to have to give birth to a baby in a barn surrounded by animals. The Messiah was born and the world did not know. Rulers are to be born in palaces, not stables. The wise men went to Jerusalem and the palace of Herod looking for the child whose star in the sky told them that a ruler had been born to Israel. Instead, according to Matthew, they found him in the simple home of a carpenter. They would never have thought about looking there for one such as they sought, and yet that is where the Messiah was to be found.

It would have been so much easier for the people of his day, for us, if God had met our expectations! They would have known that God was at work, a messiah had been born. Think of the possibilities! Instead we are given mangers and shepherds and the quiet in-breaking of God into a world that doesn't know or see what is happening.

Thinking about this has made me ask, “Why was it important for us that Jesus was born in a manger?” God did not have to let this happen. That it occurred says there is some meaning in the symbolism. I’ve been pondering this a lot this Holy season since I have been exploring the birth narrative through the songs of the slaves. From that perspective we see that all of us can identify more with a stable than a palace. Palaces represent wealth, power and often oppression. The birth of Jesus in a manger makes God approachable to all. The slaves could identify with a baby born in a manger. They could identify with how he was cruelly treated for they experienced the same. All of this is compelling but I believe there is even more.

If the Messiah had come on our terms, born into a palace, we would have seen and known God was at work but we would also have had expectations. We would expect God through God’s chosen Messiah to throw off the shackles of Rome. His coming would have been seen as power and against power. This is not the message Jesus came to proclaim. Before Jesus began his ministry he was tempted in the desert. He was offered authority over all the kingdoms. Jesus rejected this type of worldly power because he knew it was not of God.

As Jesus begins his teaching ministry we soon learn that he wants us to hear a different kind of message. He wanted us to know about a God who loves us, forgives us, encourages us, and reaches out to us. Jesus modeled that vision of God in his life. That message would have been lost if Jesus came from a palace instead of a stable. So the manger of Bethlehem not only makes God approachable it makes Jesus’ message concerning the power of love evident.

Also, I believe God wanted us to seek the chosen one. To see God at work in unexpected places means you have to be open to the possibilities that God is doing a new thing. You have to set aside your expectations and instead ask where God is in the midst of these events. The shepherds heard the good news and journeyed to see that which had been told to them. The wise men saw a star and journeyed towards Jerusalem. They had to set aside all of their presumptions when they learn that no baby had been born in the palace. As they presented their gifts to the son of a carpenter they would have to trust that this is where God had been directing them. Simeon would hold

this little baby aloft a few days later in the temple and say I can now die in peace because I have seen your salvation.

Throughout Jesus' life we have story after story of people seeing God at work in his life, his teachings and his actions. Unfortunately we have just as many stories of people rejecting his message because of who he was and where he came from. He did not fit their expectations of how God would be at work in the sending of the Messiah. The manger is only seen as a bed fit for a king when we are open to that possibility. Otherwise we miss it and like the song writers we don't know "who he is."

So I hear this song, these events reminding us to look for God in unexpected places, challenging us to being open to what God is doing, not what we want God to do. Is God to be found in the Syrian refugee camps, in the tent cities and homeless shelters of Seattle or other big cities, or beside the homeless child in Sequim who is couch surfing? To answer yes means we need to be there as well. We have to ask what we can do, how we can help, what systems we have to challenge.

We too need a word to help us in our journey, to keep us going and looking forward with hope. The slaves looked to that time when they would be free. They believed Jesus identified with them in their bondage because he was born in a manger and would be with them on the road to freedom and so they sang of this desire. God is with us on our life journey. We may have experienced tough times this year. We lost a loved one, we are dealing with major medical issues, we have challenging decisions that need to be made, and more. We feel like the world is treating us mean. The manger baby reminds us that we are not alone; God is with us, pointing us to a brighter future. We have hope because of that baby. There are no ultimate endings just doors that lead us to new beginnings.

In closing I would like to share how this worked in a person's life and might work in yours. It had been a rough year for her. She had had a mild stroke leaving her mobility impaired just enough that she had needed to move out of her home to an assisted living place. Making that change would be challenging enough but there were other losses that year. Her sister to whom she had been especially close had died. Her

son who had lived near her had been forced, because of work, to move with his family and would not be coming to see her at Christmas because he had no vacation time. Her daughter was recently married and hoped mom would understand that she needed to spend time with her husband's family. The first part of December she was feeling as low as you can get. She felt the world was a pretty dismal place. She had no joy. When one of the aides suggested putting up a tree or decorating her place for Christmas she growled at her and said, "What's the use?" A friend came to visit and she poured out all of her feelings of anger and bitterness at life. Afterwards she apologized. Her friend said nothing other than she wished life wasn't so hard. The next day when she came to lunch there was a little gift at her place. She asked who had done it and all the staff would do is smile and say, "Your own special angel." Each day found another gift at lunch. They weren't expensive, a couple of candies, a piece of child's artwork, a book, an ornament. All of a sudden she realized she was looking forward to lunch each day. Soon the other residents at her table were as excited as she was about what was in the package. She often shared or gave away the gifts. When her friend returned to visit she was sharing about her angel gifts. She asked her friend to help her decorate her place because she was in the holiday spirit. She asked her friend to take her shopping for gifts for her children and grandchildren. On Christmas Eve there had been a note saying, the best gift was yet to come. On Christmas day she rushed to the dining room to find a baby Jesus in a manger on her plate and sitting at her table was her friend who gave up having Christmas dinner with her family to be there on this difficult first Christmas. All of a sudden she knew who had given her the gifts. In seeing the baby she knew it was done out of love, a reminder God was with her. As she wrote about her Christmas angel she talked about how she was given back hope and a restored sense of purpose. The next Christmas she was again with family. She found ways to make other's holiday's festive who lived where she lived. From then on she always looked forward to what God was doing in her life that day and reminded herself that whatever is happening in life the cup of blessing is more than half full.

We celebrate a baby born in a manger, one that comes to be with us, challenge us and give us hope. AMEN.