

Westminster Presbyterian Church
Vero Beach, Florida 32966
Rev. Dr. Les Koerselman
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Psalm 80:1-7

Micah 5:2-5a6

Matthew 2:13-18

“Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, ‘Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.’ And he rose and took the child and his mother by night, and departed to Egypt, and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son.’

Then Herod, when he saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, was in a furious rage, and he sent and killed all the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two years old or under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what was spoken by the prophet Jeremiah:

‘A voice was heard in Ramah, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled, because they were no more.’”

“The Joy of Discovery”

It seems that even pastors are not immune from the sensational. One fellow, believe it or not, by the name of Rev. David Harrison, a pastor in Bolton, England, enters the sanctuary and carries with him a human skeleton. He hangs the human skeleton on a device right next to the pulpit. He says this, “If you don’t rivet their attention, you are lost.” I suppose it is his way of speaking about the mortality of our own existence and the importance of his own message.

A Baptist preacher preaching on the ascension of our Lord Jesus Christ into heaven had wires attached to his body. When he concluded the sermon, he had men off stage pull him up into the air. A very dramatic ending to his sermon we might well say.

Another: a Methodist Pastor was preaching about the message of John the Baptist. He boldly thundered, “And behold an ax is laid to the root of the tree.” Much to the surprise of the congregation he then pulled out a chainsaw and proceeded to maul an artificial palm. You have got to admit those things do get your attention. We don’t easily forget that which is visibly demonstrated before our human eyes.

How different are the lessons from the Christmas story. *There was nothing eye-catching or attention getting in the message of our Lord's birth.* Lowly shepherds hear a proclamation by an angel, "Behold, I bring you glad tidings of great joy. A Savior is born unto you in the city of David." There were no trumpets, no huge fanfare. All they were given was a summons to come and to see. They bravely did so. They left their flocks and said, "Come let us see this thing which has come to pass."

Most generally God comes to us quietly and I believe that is why Scripture says, "Be still before the Lord." The prophet Habakkuk writes, "The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth keep silence." In the beauty of this place, in the quiet recesses of your own mind and heart, does God yet speak to you? Is He moving in and through your being? Are you sensitive to His voice? Do you sense the divine in your individual life? Has this babe of Bethlehem touched you in this season? Will he touch you today? The most important question that must be asked of one is - has Christ changed you?

The message given to the shepherds were tidings of great joy. An encounter with the Living God ought to solicit joy. In Presbyterian circles, the breaking of bread and the sharing of the cup is far too often a somber, solemn occasion. Yet, Scripture says we ought to celebrate the presence of God in our midst. Certainly David was a man who dared to do such things. He taught the people of Israel to clap their hands before the Lord. He taught the people of Israel to dance before the Lord. Does your faith solicit joy? There is something wonderful about joy. It's contagious. We see a joyful person and what is our response. We ask a question, we want to know the reason for their joy. When we exhibit genuine joy, it becomes an opportunity to share our faith with others.

There is another lesson that must be learned from Christmas. It is simply this, I believe: *Life is a journey.* Mary and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem. Anxiety and doubt were their traveling companions, not knowing whether the journey would be safe or harmful. Remember that Mary was about to deliver. She is coming to the end of her ninth month. You can understand the concern of Joseph as he contemplates travel under these conditions. The lesson? Life's journey is always fraught with difficulty. Life's journey comes with uncertainties and yet faith, dear friends, is the ability to move forward with a sure and confident attitude. That is why St. Paul said, "We walk by faith and not by sight." If you haven't done so, today begin to walk by faith. Acknowledge that our Lord will uphold you on your journey.

Another lesson is that *God's plan is always the right plan.* How tragic are the words of regret from those who look back upon their lives and realize that their willful spirits caused them to choose that which was not right for them. The pain of these words is self evident, "If only I had the opportunity to do it over again, I would do it differently." Let your prayers always seek God's will for your life, "thy will be done."

Remember that God's will is always the perfect plan for your life. God had a plan for Mary; God had a mission for Joseph. Dear friends, God has a plan for your individual life. You may believe that with the advance of years the plan is not that important. Believe me; it is ALL-important because you are moving towards your place of final destination. God has a plan for each man and each woman gathered in this place today. Discover it! He needed the cooperation of Mary, the cooperation of Joseph and for heaven's sakes he needs our cooperation.

Another lesson from the past: *God's timing is always perfect timing.* That is difficult to believe. Far too often we are anxious, fretful and impatient. We cry out with the psalmist, "How long O Lord? How long do I have to put up with this disease? How long do I have to wait for my children to come back to You? How long do I have to see the suffering of the world and see it go unabated? How long, O Lord?" Scriptures tell us to "Wait upon the Lord. Wait patiently for him and he will give you the desires of your heart." It proclaims that our strength shall be renewed and that obstacles will become opportunities." Remember that God's timing is always perfect timing.

Another message: *there are moments when we must flee evil.* The command to Joseph: "Rise, take the child and his mother and flee into Egypt." "No dilly-dallying, no debating the issue, no saying, it might not happen, get out of town, Joseph. It's time now to take the child and his mother." The old King James Version used to say it this way and it had thunder to it. "Abhor that which is evil and cleave on to that which is good." Lot, his wife and children surrounded by evil in the city of Sodom and Gomorrah were told to flee evil. The people of Israel were commanded to separate themselves in order that they might be holy unto the Lord and be dedicated to him. There may be moments when the Spirit of God is speaking to you and saying, "Flee evil, wait not, arise, go."

I can't help but think another lesson from the past comes to us from the innkeeper without a name. *He saw a need and failed to respond.* He must have noticed Mary's condition. He must have seen the concern on Joseph's face and sensed the fatigue of the journey. When we see the needs of others, will we have the courage to respond? We need to develop the eyes of Jesus. The Gospel of Mark records that Jesus saw the crowds and had compassion upon them for they were as sheep without a shepherd. Develop the eyes of compassion.

Another lesson is *be prepared for what God has in mind.* Are you prepared for what life will offer?

Jimmy Carter writing in his book, "Living Faith," describes something of the Amish community. He says that the Amish community is based upon the New Testament but in particular the Sermon on the Mount or the Beatitudes.

The Amish do not accept any intermediary between God and man. They believe that each individual has access to the Savior. All their religious services are held in individual homes. When a congregation grows too large to meet comfortably in a single house, they split into two groups and a pastor is chosen from among the men. Notice how they choose them. The bishop places a marker in one of the hymnbooks. The one who draws the marker is assumed to have been ordained by God to be the new leader. The bishops generally serve as servants to three or four small congregations and oversee the pastors' activities. For each worship service a wagon is loaded with black benches and taken to a house. Get this; no one knows in advance who will preach that morning. Again, the leader for the day is chosen by lot or by last-minute consensus. Jimmy Carter says this, "I asked the bishop how people could prepare for a sermon if they didn't know they would be called upon to preach?" The bishop looked at him and replied with a genuinely modest attitude, "Mr. President, we always have to be prepared." Are you prepared for life?

Another lesson is there *comes a point when the journey is over and we arrive at the place of our destination*. Some who occupy the pews in this place today will not be with us next Christmas. God knows who, when, the hour, the day. The summons of God will come to all and when the journey is over; our place of destination ought to be the very gates of glory.

Bishop Ray Boland of the Catholic Diocese of Kansas City wrote this prayer for postal workers. I think it appropriate for it speaks of our place of destination when the journey is over. This is what he wrote. Listen to it:

God our Father may everything we do be first class.
Print your own loving zip code upon our hearts,
That we may never go astray.
Provide in your gracious providence special handling,
for those of us who are fragile and keep us in one piece.
We have been signed, sealed, stamped and delivered,
in your image and likeness.

And we beg you to keep us in your care,
As we go about our appointed rounds.
And, O Father, when our days draw to a close,
And we are marked "Return to Sender",
Be there to greet us at heaven's door so that nobody may ever say,
UNKNOWN AT THIS ADDRESS.