

Advent 2010 Preaching Series: “Blessings of the Manger” – Part 4: “The Blessing of God With Us – Being Christ-like”

Matt. 1:18-25

A sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden

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Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 19, 2010

MUMC, Thomasville, NC

In Matthew’s gospel, the story of Jesus’ birth is told in a mere eight verses in chapter one. On the one hand, the Nativity story in so few verses underlines how ordinary Jesus’ birth was. On the other hand, it was loaded with theological meaning for the Matthean church. The facts are clear: Mary and Joseph were common people faced with decisions that face us all: decisions about tradition, marriage, and family. Their story tells us that God enters our lives in the ordinary places where we live, work, and play.

In our Advent preaching series called *Blessings of the Manger* the Reverend Jeanne Finley invites us on this Fourth and last Sunday of Advent to focus on “the blessing of God with us.” And I have added the sub-title, “Being Christ-like.” Today we are reminded that God is “Emmanuel,” meaning “God with us,” a name that expresses our belief in the Incarnation: that God stepped into our world ...that God came to us in the baby Jesus. The Incarnation is our Christian belief in the blessing that God through Christ was with us in the flesh, in the ordinary, in the real world where we live.

The following story was told by Alice Gray in her book *Christmas Stories for the Heart* ...One time there was a pastor who went to his church on Christmas morning to make sure everything had been cleaned and put away after the midnight Christmas Eve service. There were a few bulletins stuck in hymnals and he spotted some candle wax under the pews. The church was cold since the heat had been turned off following the service. Before he left the sanctuary he paused beside the life-sized nativity scene and said a prayer. The figures were beautifully crafted and the pastor gazed at the holy family with reverence and awe.

Suddenly he realized, the manger was empty. Baby Jesus was missing. The pastor searched the area but could not find the infant savior anyplace. He looked under the pews, in the choir loft, in the balcony, all throughout the church. He called the church custodian to see if he knew that the baby Jesus was missing. But, he knew nothing. He called the associate pastor and the lay leaders but they didn’t know anything about the missing Christ child either. The pastor began to panic. Someone must have stolen the infant Jesus from the manger.

The pastor was disappointed to think that someone would commit such a terrible crime against the church. How could Christmas be Christmas without the babe lying in a manger? In the tradition of that local church there was always a service on Christmas Day. Worshippers began to gather for the Christmas morning service. During his announcements the pastor said, “The figure of the Christ Child must be returned before the end of the day or Christmas will not be as it should. If anyone knows of its whereabouts and sees that it is returned, no questions will be asked.” The service ended with the congregation singing, “O come let us adore him,” but the manger remained empty the rest of the day. The pastor thought the faith of the congregation was being tested.

Later that day, discouraged and heavy-hearted, the pastor took a walk through the streets of the little town. He came upon one of the young members of his church, a six-year-old boy, named Tommy. Tommy was bundled up, protecting himself against the cold weather. He was proudly pulling a red toy wagon behind him. It was bright and shiny, probably a gift he had received for Christmas. The pastor knew his parents’ financial situation and thought that Tommy was fortunate to have received a gift. “They must have made a tremendous sacrifice to give Tommy a wagon for Christmas,” he thought to himself.” He knew how much they had been struggling to make ends meet.

As the pastor got closer to Tommy he noticed a bundle in the wagon. Not totally hidden in the blanket was the baby Jesus from the nativity in the church. The pastor crouched down beside Tommy. His face was grim and filled with disappointment. Tommy was just a little boy, but the pastor felt he was old enough to know that stealing was wrong. The pastor made it clear that Tommy had committed a crime and as he spoke Tommy’s eyes began to fill with tears. Finally Tommy spoke. “But pastor, I didn’t steal baby Jesus. It wasn’t like that at all.” Tommy paused to swallow and wipe away a few tears. “I’ve been asking Jesus for a red wagon for the last three years, and I promised him when I received it I would give him the first ride. In our home we exchange gifts on Christmas Eve. So I came up to the church to thank Jesus for my wagon and to keep my promise that he should have the first ride.”

As Christian people we affirm the blessing of God with us. We affirm the Incarnation. Through Jesus God identified with humankind. Jesus knew about being hungry and tired. From the moment of his humble birth in Bethlehem Jesus knew about uncomfortable, wet,

soiled, swaddling clothes. Jesus lived in our kind of world, a real world, a world that is both messy and beautiful. Jesus understands our longing for love, as well as our need for material comfort and security. God became truly human. So God knows the depths of our desires from the heights of universal love to the lowly level of a little wagon. God knows what we really want or need. So, like Tommy, we might as well be honest with ourselves and ask for it. And then let God decide whether what we ask for is really a want or a need in our lives.

Jesus, God's greatest gift, has been given to all humankind. The blessing of "Emmanuel," God with us, is literally that: God WITH us – God riding in toy wagons or in luxury cars, God lying with us in hospitals, God going with us to our temporary jobs in a difficult economic climate, God even accompanying us to shopping malls for last minute Christmas shopping, or God experiencing the pain people feel when separated from families in far-away places like Iraq or Afghanistan, or God feeling our grief and standing beside us in a funeral home.

Before I end I must draw our attention to a point Finley makes at the end of this chapter: the blessing of God with us has enormous implications for how we live our lives. This is where my sub-title, "Being Christ-like," comes in. Finley says: "We are to love what God loves – people, nations, nature, and the whole created order." If we are to love as God loves, what does God expect from us? Perhaps nothing more than a ride in a wagon. Taking Jesus for a ride means taking Jesus with us wherever we go when we leave this place. Like Tommy taking Jesus out of the church and into the world with him, I suspect that what God desires is that we leave this place with a far greater gift than we have been able to offer.

We become Christ-like when we allow God to journey with us through life, to travel with us in our daily lives, to be noticed as our companion, to proclaim to the world that Jesus is our friend and our Lord, to be God's hands and feet, to love what God loves, and to reveal to those around us the mind and the heart and attitude of Jesus Christ who loved and accepted *all* people irrespective of culture, language, race, age, ethnicity, or socio-economic status.

Jesus didn't stay in a manger. When we get up and leave this place of worship today, Jesus does not want to be left behind here. Jesus expects to go with us. God has given us the blessing of "God with us" ...the gift of Jesus' life. As we receive this blessing anew, the spirit

of Jesus will make us Christ-like. Let us go now and take this blessing of God with us to others.
God may even provide a little wagon for this purpose if we really need it!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.