

August 1, 2010

Winnetka Presbyterian Church

# The Road to Bethlehem

Hosea 11:1-11

Luke 2:1-7

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How many of you remember the “Road” movies from years ago, starring Bing Crosby, Bob Hope and Dorothy Lamour? Movie buffs will easily recall that series of comedy films from the ‘40s and ‘50s featuring exotic places in *The Road to Morocco*, or *The Road to Bali*, or *The Road to Rio*. Admittedly, you have to be pretty old to remember seeing these films when they first came out. But the scenes were vivid enough and the dialogue funny enough to make them worthy of our fading memories. The movies were a combination of adventure, comedy, romance, and music. The plot often took a back seat to the gags, many of them ad-libbed by Crosby and Hope during filming.

Bob and Bing would usually play some form of con-artists trying to make a lot of money, with Bing coming up with the ideas and Bob usually doing the dirty work. When confronted by the villain, Bob and Bing would us a ‘patty cake’ routine before throwing punches. Sometimes it worked and sometimes it didn’t. There were frequent instances where Bob Hope would break an unwritten rule by addressing the audience directly, as in *The Road to Bali* where he says “[Crosby]’s gonna sing, folks. Now’s the time to go out and get the popcorn.” (I regret to announce that there’s no popcorn for you to go out and get while I preach this sermon.)

Today’s theme is *The Road to Bethlehem*, and somehow the connotation and the imagery is vastly different from the Road movies of yesteryear. Our summer theme, as most of you know, is *A Journey through the Bible*, and with Pastor David, Martha and Nicole having taken us through the Old Testament, we are now on the outskirts of Bethlehem. The road to Bethlehem is not being traveled by a couple of comedians, but by an almost mythical young couple named Joseph and Mary, who are on their way to be registered in Joseph’s hometown, as ordered by no less a person than Caesar Augustus. As it happens, the young bride-to-be is pregnant and the baby is due... soon. To make matters worse, the small town is already filled to capacity, and the young couple is forced to spend the night in a barn. This is the story we hear every Christmas, and with an apology to a warm August day, let us hear the familiar story again, as it is found in the Gospel according to Luke, in the second chapter, beginning at the first verse. Listen for the Word of God.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

This ends the assigned reading for today – a strange place for ending. If we didn’t know what Paul Harvey called “the rest of the story,” we’d surely be left dangling. From this reading, we have no clue who Joseph and Mary are, and the baby isn’t even named. The next paragraph, fortunately, fills in some of the spaces. There we find shepherds out on a hillside, “keeping watch over their flock by night.” They are astounded when an angel appears, who makes clear that they are the first to hear the good news. “To you,” the angel tells the shepherds, “is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

“Wow!” the shepherds must have thought. “We’ve been hearing that someday a Messiah would come. But tonight! In this out-of-the-way town? Come on! Somebody’s pullin’ our leg!” But then the sky turns bright as a mass of angels cut loose with a chorus that would have drowned out the Mormon Tabernacle Choir – singing at

the top of their voices: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among the people!” Peace on earth! Good will to all! It’s hard to come up with anything better than that. So what do the shepherds do? They rush into town to see if it’s true. And it is! There they find Joseph and Mary, and yes: there is the little one, God’s special baby, lying in a manger.

We know the rest of the story well. The shepherds do their part in spreading the news – all the time glorifying and praising God for what they have heard and seen. Luke tells us more – that after eight days, the baby is circumcised in good Jewish fashion. A few weeks later the holy family shows up in Jerusalem where they offer a sacrifice of turtle doves on the high altar as they present baby Jesus to the Lord. As a final point in Luke’s narration we find old Simeon standing awe-struck in the Temple. He had been promised that he would see the Lord’s Messiah before dying... and it’s true. In ecstasy, Simeon takes the baby in his arms, holds him high before the Eternal God, and says the famous words of the *nunc dimittis*: “*Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to thy people Israel.*”

With these words we have in capsule form the Gospel. Not all of it, but in truth we have one of the essential parts. This is the coming of God to earth in physical form, in order to live among us, in order to have and know life as a human being. It’s what John is talking about as the Fourth Gospel opens. Speaking of the *Logos*, the living Word, John declares that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.” Becoming flesh. Becoming human. This is what God does among us according to the doctrine of the Incarnation.

Let me be your theology instructor for just a moment. There are a number of Christian doctrinal truths that have been taught across the ages. There are only two, however, that are at the heart of our basic Christian beliefs about Jesus. These doctrines are the Incarnation and the Atonement. The first is about God coming into our world as the only begotten Son of the Father, God in the flesh. The other doctrine, the atonement, is about the sacrifice that Jesus made in giving up his life on the Cross for our salvation. Ultimately, you cannot have one without the other. In the first place we need a God who truly understands our human condition, who knows what it means to be hungry and thirsty, who lives and breathes and bleeds and dies just like all human beings have done from the beginning of time. In the second place we need a Savior, a Messiah, who not only lives and breathes and bleeds and dies as we must do, but a Savior who teaches us, who dies for us, and who is resurrected to a new kind of life – a sign that our life does not end with the grave, a sign that we may have eternal life with the Lord. Incarnation and Atonement. There you have it, the two great doctrines of the Church. That’s your theology lesson for today.

But, as you might guess, this is not all that needs to be said. Our theme for today is *The Road to Bethlehem*, not the arrival there. If we are to be efficient, should we not say something about the journey itself? Roads, as we all know, are transportation avenues that lead from point A to point B. If we have been on the Road to Bethlehem and actually arrived at the Incarnation, God’s birth in the flesh of a baby called Jesus, how did we get there? And where did we come from? It’s not enough to say from Nazareth, although literally that’s where the holy family came from as they journeyed south on their way to the City of David. The real question is: why Bethlehem at all? Why was the Incarnation necessary? Wasn’t that a strange thing for God to do?

From the beginning of time human beings have been puzzled about the origin and purpose of life. In the Holy Bible we find a magnificent saga of answers. The Book of Genesis starts out with two accounts about the creation of the world. In chapter two, God breathes into man the *nephish hiyah*, the breath of life – that’s when Adam and Eve appear on the scene. In the first eleven chapters of Genesis there are beautiful mythical stories about the Garden of Eden and the forbidden fruit, about Cain and Abel, about the flood and Noah’s Ark, and about the tower of Babel.

The first Road story, however, is about Abraham, the Patriarch who is told by the Lord to “Go from your country and your kindred... to a land that I will show you.” [“I’m sending you on a road trip.”] God’s plan was that Abraham would be the Father of a new nation of people – a people devoted to Yahweh. Abraham was able to do that by migrating from Mesopotamia to Canaan. There he founded the Hebrews as a nation and planted them as God commanded. His sons and grandsons all add their stories to the grand saga of tales told in the Bible. In the end, due to a draught in the land, the Patriarchal family moves along a new road, south to Egypt, for survival – where the mistreated last son, Joseph, has been sold into slavery by his brothers. Although Joseph effectively saves the family, Hebrews in a land of bondage was not what God had in mind.

Shift forward many years to the time of Moses. As the man who murdered a task master, Moses seemed an unlikely choice for God’s master plan. Having fled for his life from the Egyptian authorities, Moses was now a lowly shepherd tending flocks in the Sinai Desert. One day he sees a bush burning brightly that wouldn’t go out; but more remarkable than the burning bush was the voice of God. “Moses. Moses!” “Yes, here I am,” answered the frightened shepherd. And with that God tells Moses to “Hit the road back to Egypt. I have observed the misery of my people, and I’ve chosen you to set them free!” Moses was aghast, but he did what the Lord commanded. His confrontation with the Pharaoh, his leading the Children of Israel out of slavery, crossing the Sea of Reeds on the way to a Promised Land – that had to be a road show to end all road shows. For forty years the people wandered around in the wilderness of Sinai – someone said because Moses was a man and he wouldn’t ask directions. But it was during those years that Moses went up the Mountain and talked personally with God, before bringing down to the people the Tablets of Stone, on which the Ten Commandments were written. This was very likely the most significant event in the life of the Hebrews, a God-intoxicated people.

Bible history moves slowly and ponderously onward. Under Joshua, the people begin their gradual occupation and conquest of the land God promised them, a land flowing with milk and honey. Twelve loosely knit Tribes begin their settlement of the territories, although wars kept springing up with the Canaanites and Philistines. Only a few divinely chosen Judges were able to hold the nation together.

Two hundred years pass, with more wars and a few times of peace. We come now to the era of the Monarchy, the time of three great kings: Saul, David and Solomon. King David conquers Jerusalem from a Canaanite clan, and establishes his capital there, from which the Twelve motley tribal areas are administered. King Solomon builds the first Temple, and for a time it looks as though the whole nation is peacefully united, with Yahweh-God proudly seated in the new Temple, in the Holy of Holies.

Sadly, the union doesn’t last. The monarchy breaks in two, with the nation of Israel to the north, and the nation of Judah to the south. The tribal factions spend as much time fighting one another as a common enemy. It is during this time, eight, seven and six hundred years before Christ, that the great Prophets proclaim their holy words. Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Micah, Hosea – these are but a few of the holy men who spoke boldly on behalf of the Lord. It was from the Book of the Prophet Hosea that our Old Testament lesson was read, a passage about the love God has for his errant nation Israel.

A major concern of the Prophets was the impending demise of both countries. Israel is first to be conquered by the Assyrians. Ten Tribes are destroyed, never to be heard from again. And just over a century later, Judah is conquered. Jerusalem is destroyed, the Temple torn down, and all the leading citizens are carried off to Babylon as slaves. That road to Babylonia became a 70-year period called The Exile, a time when the Jews had no nation at all, with their lives spent as servants of a pagan king. You heard about this time last week and the week before, as David and Nicole discussed the pathos of refugees without a homeland, without a sacred place for the worship of God.

In 539 BC, Cyrus the Persian issued his edict, allowing the Jews to go back home, where they rebuilt their Temple, rebuilt the wall around Jerusalem, and restored as much as they could of their faith. But things were never quite the same. They were a people who lived in poverty. They were conquered – by Alexander the Great, fought over by the Seleucids and the Ptolomies, abused by the hated Antiochus Epiphanes, unfairly ruled by their own high priests, and finally taken over by Pompey on behalf of the Roman Empire. Herod the Great became their king, utilizing the two-fisted approach of building great monuments including a completely revamped Temple Mount, while at the same time insisting on a liberal Hellenistic way of life that stuck in the craw of the faithful.

This sweep of Bible history brings us at last to the road on which we began, the road to Bethlehem. Why was Bethlehem necessary? Why did the Incarnation take place? Why was Jesus born?

At the time of creation, God provided Adam and Eve with all the creature comforts anyone could desire. The Garden of Eden was a place of peace and delight – until sin entered the world for eating the forbidden fruit. The honor system, God discovered, simply didn't work.

The next thing God tried was the drawing up of a covenant between himself and Abraham, father of the newly established nation. "I will be your God, and you will be my people," the Lord proclaimed. It worked from time to time, but gradually the Patriarchal family became distracted, falling in love with the false gods of the Ammonites, the Moabites, and the Egyptians.

"Something more must be done," God thought. So he chose Moses as leader of the people, and sent him to a mountaintop where God delivered the Law. "These commandments, ten of them, will surely let the people know right from wrong," the Lord said to Moses. Clearly, the people would have no other God than Yahweh. They would not kill, they would not steal, they would not commit adultery, and all the rest. But in less than 300 years, such a king as Solomon was cavorting with wives and concubines all over the place, and even setting up idols for his foreign wives to worship. It didn't appear that The Law would work after all.

God then sent the Prophets. They spoke boldly for the primacy of Yahweh. They spoke out for human rights, calling loudly for mercy and compassion in the treatment of human beings. They threatened destruction of their holy nations if the way of the Lord was not followed. But to no avail. The people continued to sin. Israel was destroyed. Judah was carried into Exile. The Temple was torn down and the Hebrew faith almost died.

"What else is there to do?" God may have wondered. "I gave them a perfect garden. I agreed to the covenant that Abraham and I drew up. I gave them a set of Commandments that actually spelled out right from wrong. I sent them Kings and the best Prophets the world has ever known. They were warned and prodded in every way, even using a Syrian king as the rod of my wrath. I sent them into Exile and brought them home again to Jerusalem, built them a Temple one more time – and still they would not learn. What else is there to do?"

Quietly, the Eternal God sits meditatively upon his throne. At last he says to himself, "Yes. That's what I will do. I will do it. I will send my own son to live among them. They will listen to him. He will be gentle and loving, compassionate and true. He will teach them the meaning of faith, that I'm not a vindictive God, that I'm merciful, that I want nothing more than to forgive people for all their sins, and to save them from their retched ways. My child will be known as the Prince of Peace. I know they will listen to him. Yes, that is what I will do, and Bethlehem will be the starting place. I will send them my only begotten son."

Amen.