

Evil and the Innocent

Then Herod, when he saw that he was mocked of the wise men, was exceeding wrath, and sent forth, and slew all the children that were in Bethlehem, and in all the coasts thereof, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had diligently inquired of the wise men.

– Matthew 2:16 –

The account of the Nativity of our Lord is eternally (though permissively) marred with Satan's fingerprint. We would love for nothing more than to read through the history of the birth of the Savior of the world and find only the sweet, transcendent truth of the incarnation of the Son of God and all its warm accompaniments of the adoration of shepherds, the worship of angels, and the emblematic homage of the Magi. But the Spirit of God characteristically records the whole truth, and He does not ignore the unimaginable evil that is always present in a fallen world – the evil that seeks to counter even the most glorious of God's works. The Babe in the manger would one day remind us that the devil was a murderer from the beginning. It is no surprise we find our Enemy inspiring his vassal king to slaughter the innocent children in Bethlehem-Judah, so that everyone can remember that he is, at least for the moment, the god of this world.

The arch Fiend finds sadistic delight in all kinds of mayhem, but none so much as when he can scar or destroy innocence. At no other time does he hold so much sway in the hearts of men as when he can cause them to question why a good God would allow horrific catastrophe to befall undeserving subjects of earth. So effective is this stratagem that he has increasingly refined the devices used to meet out his pernicious ends. Consider his attacks today on the most innocent in our modern world. Through abortion he has half the population of greatest nation on earth fully believing that the state-sanctioned murder of life in the womb is morally justified under a rhetorical umbrella of "choice." By divorce and addiction, he robs little ones of the security of home and sets them on a life-long exile through a labyrinth of memories that severely inhibit their ability to find their purpose in the Heavenly Father's plan for their lives. And the new wave of assault seems to be to confuse unsuspecting youngsters about their gender, which is the most fundamental aspect of their God-given identity. These are all devilishly crafted and culturally sanctioned forms of abuse, hellishly inspired and specifically intended to destroy the most vulnerable among us.

The God who came to Bethlehem as a Babe came to destroy sin in the flesh, but He will soon return as the King of Kings and Lord of Lords to eradicate the curse and reclaim the earth. Our gloating Enemy's age-old interference in God's plans will not be tolerated in that day. There will no longer exist any legal authority for him to steal, to kill, and to destroy. The innocents of Bethlehem along with those the devil has decimated for millennia will undoubtedly hold prime positions in the Savior's retinue. They will bear witness at the devil's trial, perhaps even securing the millstone about his neck that will send him headlong into the lake of fire and brimstone to be tormented day and night forever. Even so, come Lord Jesus.

Apt rendering

*What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?
Psalm 116:12*

As the psalmist contemplates the grace of the Lord in delivering him from trouble and sorrow, and apparently death, he utters this question, which can be taken both as rhetorical and practical. In the rhetorical sense, it is evident that there is nothing that the Lord needs. He says so in Psalm 50. It is impossible to repay Him for all of His benefits bestowed. From the psalmist's point of view, this applies at least to the immediate deliverance described, but also appears from our text to extend to all of His benefits. In the practical sense, he answers his own question with a number of possibilities. First, he naturally says that he will in fact take the cup of salvation provided and call on the name of the Lord. Then he states twice that he will pay his vows unto the Lord in the presence of all His people. This would no doubt refer to particular sacrifices offered in the temple as prescribed in Leviticus for a thank offering, as he describes offering the sacrifice of thanksgiving and calling on the name of the Lord. Doing this in the presence of His people emphasizes the public nature of his thanks. In the midst of these responses, he announces his resolve to be the Lord's servant.

There are direct applications here for those of us who have been delivered from eternal death by Jesus Christ. We have no ability to repay Him for the gift of eternal life. So our first act of thanks to God for this gift is to humbly receive it by faith, calling on His name (Romans 10:13). After this, we can understand that the once for all offering that Christ made for us fulfills and replaces all Old Testament sacrifices (Hebrews 9:11-14). Therefore, as His redeemed, through His new and living way, we fulfill our vow to "offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15). Then, not only with our lips, but with our lives and all His benefits that He loads us with daily, we serve Him who is worthy of more than we could ever render, in the presence of all who would follow in giving Him thanks and praise.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Worth the Wait

Luke 8:40: And it came to pass, that, when Jesus was returned, the people gladly received him: for they were all waiting for him.

Scholars like to refer to those incipient days of Christ's miracle-working ministry as the "years of His popularity". After His baptism there was such a proliferation of signs and wonders that His "fame hereof went abroad into all that land". The report of the power and virtue that accompanied His every visitation caused hope to spring forth in the hearts of the oppressed. Those who had borne long the yoke of Roman dominion, with its burdensome taxes and ruthless tyranny, had reason to rejoice that the prophesied deliverance was at hand.

Though the people had yet to see, for themselves, this Promised One, the glad tidings preceded Him fueling an unquenchable anticipation in their hearts. The potential benefit derived from His being in their midst was well worth the waiting. They believed the report that demoniacs were liberated from their protracted bondage, that the dead were summoned back from their paradisaal rest in Abraham's bosom, that blinded eyes beheld the beauty of God's creation for the first time, the deaf ear delighted to the songs of salvation, and the report of a plethora of such amazements that "the world itself could not contain the books that should be written" to record the numberless demonstrations of His omnipotence.

His first coming was a mere prelude of that second appearance when, as had been vouchsafed to all believes, a permanent end to the suffering miseries of a creation bound by the curse of sin and death. While laboring under the burden of the curse, we are often tempted to join the plaintive cry of the martyrs of tribulation who ask "How long, O Lord?". But like those citizens in our text, we wait for His coming and will gladly receive Him when finally He appears in clouds of glory. II Thessalonians 1:10: When he shall come to be glorified in his saints, and to be admired in all them that believe (because our testimony among you was believed) in that day. It will be worth the wait!

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

The Light of the World

Then spake Jesus again unto them, saying, I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.

– John 8:12 –

It is always amusing to me when I hear “experts” suggest that Jesus was misunderstood by his followers and never intended to claim deity. I am not sure how statements like “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, “I and my Father are one”, and “Before Abraham was, I am” can possibly be misconstrued. If Jesus was not claiming to be God in the flesh, words have no meaning at all.

One of the Lord’s lofty self-seized appellations is the “Light of the World”. Despite all of the commercialization, marketing, and range of avarice that accompanies the holiday season, the fact remains that more than two thousand years after Jesus spoke these words, the entire world annually “shuts down” for twenty-four hours to commemorate His birth and gives more than nominal credence to its desire for His promise of peace on earth and good will to men. And how thankful are we, the sheep of His pasture, not only for His dawning in Bethlehem’s stall, but for the moment the Dayspring from on High shone in the darkness of our hearts to forever change our murky and shadowy existence into the brilliance of His gracious redemption life!

Light drives the night away. Where light is, darkness can never triumph. It has no choice but to flee. Jesus is the Light of the World.

Light reveals. It unveils the truth. What may have been able to exist unnoticed or disguised in the shadows will be shown for what it is when the light finds it. Jesus is the Light of the World.

Light brings life and growth. Life shrivels, slows, and hides upon nightfall. But when morning dawns, the day begins and ushers in opportunity, activity, and gain. Jesus is the Light of the World.

Light is beautiful. It attracts every non-nocturnal eye. It is warm and welcome. Clouds may obscure the vision, but it will always break through, bringing joy and rejoicing to the heart. Jesus is the Light of the World.

The world around us is dark and the devil is haughty enough to believe himself to be winning. But Jesus is still the Light of the World. Light and life to all He brings, ris’n with healing in His wings. Let us faithfully reflect His brilliance. In doing so, we assist our Lord in defeating the darkness until the day we become eye-witness to the New Jerusalem where there is no need for sun nor moon nor stars because the Lamb Himself is the light thereof.

-- D. Murcek

Confidence and Caution

Wherefore let him that thinketh that he standeth take heed lest he fall.

I Corinthians 10:12

Life is filled with balance. Days are divided by times of light and darkness. The earth needs both rain and sunshine. For our own health, we need a balanced diet, and our bodies require times of activity as well as seasons of rest. In education, a variety of subjects are necessary lest we become one-dimensional. Consider then that our spiritual life is nourished by the right balance of praying, reading the scriptures, and applying what we read. Today's verse presents the importance of balancing confidence and caution in our Christian life.

Both confidence and caution can present a danger to our spiritual well-being if misplaced or disproportionate. If we are over-confident, especially in ourselves and not the Lord, we will be blinded to the subtle traps of the devil. If we are ultra-cautious, fear will cripple us from attempting to do anything for the Lord. Throughout the scriptures, we see verses that admonish believers to be firm and strong in their faith.

We are to be *strong in the Lord, and in the power of his might*; also, we are to *stand fast in the Lord*. Like the Apostle Paul, we should be as ambassadors that open our mouths boldly. When we follow the Lord, He will teach us many lessons, and help us to grow in our faith and relationship with Him. In this sanctification process, we can learn to resist temptations and sins which so easily beset us.

We should be thankful for every victory achieved, while at the same time retaining caution lest we think we are above Satan's traps. It is imperative for believers to not be ignorant of Satan's devices. When the believer is delivered from the clutches of the devil at their conversion, the enemy of our faith then redirects his attention to rendering the new believer impotent through temptation and sin. To avoid this trap, we should keep vigilant in our faith. With the many scriptures that encourage us to stand strong, there are just as many that warn us to take heed. We are to take heed to what we hear, to not be deceived, to consider our motive as we do good deeds, to watch and pray, to weigh how we use our liberty, to moderate how we speak of each other, and also to take heed of the ministry we have received.

Remembering that we stand confident on that foundation that no man can lay, and always keeping a level of caution, can help prevent regressing in our Christian walk. Today, pray for God to help us keep a proper balance, so we can best serve the One who called us into His harvest field.

J. Ekis

Followship

And as Jesus passed forth from thence, he saw a man, named Matthew, sitting at the receipt of custom: and He saith unto him, Follow me. And he arose and followed Him. (Matthew 9:9)

“Follow me” - these simple words were not only presented to the tax collector Matthew, but they are repeatedly presented to every person who walks this earth. Early in one’s life, there is that inaudible voice calling out for us to follow the Lord. The One who brought us into the world has created each one of us for a divine purpose, and fulfilling that purpose is the only thing that will bring a sense of satisfaction for each of us. We might not recognize His voice at first, but He continues to call out to us through the stages of life. The person who wastes their God-given talents for advancement in this world will come up empty while often suppressing that invitation. When someone gets caught up in following the broad road that leads to destruction, those same two words, “Follow me”, will be called out, that they might quickly exit and follow the footsteps of the Savior. Even the moral church attender, who is involved in its programs, is invited to leave their outward performance and with a sincere heart follow Jesus.

When Jesus called for Matthew to follow Him, where was the Savior going? As the Lord called out to each of His disciples, He was embarking on His earthly mission. Following Him, Matthew would hear Jesus’ teachings about a heavenly kingdom. Matthew would see Him reaching out to the outcast and the downtrodden, offering them hope for this life and the life to come. The tax collector, who had gained ill-gotten riches, would see others find the true riches of eternal life. Matthew would also see compassion in action as Jesus would feed the five thousand, restore sight to blind eyes, cleanse lepers, cause the lame to leap for joy, and even raise the dead back to life. Eventually, Matthew would see God’s eternal plan of salvation accomplished by Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross and the power of God poured out from His empty tomb. At Jesus’ ascension, Matthew would be reminded of the impact of following the risen Savior, and that Jesus would always be with him.

Those two words “Follow me” are called out to us every day, reminding us that we, as well, need to follow the Lord to the crucifixion and lay our lives down. Then, with the power of His resurrection, we may live in the newness of the life He gives. Following Jesus, we will find a more satisfying life that is filled with the joy of His presence. As you waken each morning, choose to block out any distraction and open your ears and heart to hear Jesus say “Follow Me.”

J. Ekis

The natural question

And the people asked him, saying, What shall we do then?

Luke 3:10

In this chapter Luke introduces us to the ministry of John the Baptist, as he came “preaching the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins,” fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah chapter 40. As a multitude responded to his message and came for baptism, he called them a generation of vipers and warned them to “bring forth therefore fruits meet for repentance.” He addressed directly the human problem of self-deception, to challenge them to check their motive for coming to him for baptism. He warned them of impending fiery judgment that would discern those genuinely repentant from those reliant on their natural heritage, even through an outward ritual signifying inner cleansing. He also mercifully gave them the practical measure to make the determination: fruits worthy of repentance. This general response of the people in our text reveals a genuine desire to be able to know the difference: “What shall we do *then?*” In other words, if this is truly the case, and I want to avoid the judgment of ill-motive and be completely sincere, how can I know? John then proceeded to answer this question generally to the people, as well as to distinct groups who asked, like the publicans and soldiers, with examples of fruits that would be produced by genuine repentance in each of their cases.

This reflects a natural response from those who truly care about knowing and being reconciled to the Lord of glory and following Him. Thus, we have plenty of answers in the New Testament, both from John and Jesus in the gospels, and from the apostolic writers of the epistles, describing fruits worthy of repentance. Sometimes these are mistaken by men to be lists of works to do, or not do, to be righteous. But the great doctrinal teachings of the epistles, especially of Paul, clearly substantiate justification by grace through faith alone. Yet these are all accompanied, and often followed, with the description of life that has surrendered to the Spirit of God, in answer to the believing heart that asks, “what shall we do then?” Jesus said, “if ye love me, keep my commandments.” His disciple John in his first epistle elaborates that His commandments are not grievous to those truly born of God. Saul of Tarsus, from the ground beneath his horse said, “Lord, what wilt Thou have me to do?” And Paul said to the Colossians, “If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above.” These are not burdens to be borne, but answers to redeemed hearts desirous to walk even as He walked. Let us ask the question continually and sincerely.

All Things for Good

And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.

– Luke 2:1 –

New taxes are rarely, if ever, welcomed news. Even today, for all the virtue signaling and re-characterization of excessive tax burdens being foisted upon and sold to the American people, every day folks (at least those who are engaged in how economics work) simply do not respond positively to statutes and mandates that strip them of their money, only to be redistributed by politicians and bureaucrats.

Caesar's decree had to be not only an unwelcome but also a disturbing moment for Joseph and Mary. They already had very little. The pecuniary burden involved in the taxation was doubtless a concern, but it was really the smallest challenge they were facing. Everything they knew was in Nazareth. Even with the suspicious eyes all around them regarding Mary's pregnancy prior to their union in wedlock, there was some comfort to be had in that the local gossips were at least familiar and familial. But news of a journey to Bethlehem likely brought anxiety in many forms. It would be lonely. It would be arduous. It would be dangerous. Mary could doubtless find some emotional security in Joseph's protective care, but Joseph's trust would have to be placed squarely and solely in the God who had been moving so dramatically in their lives for the past nine months. Only He, and not Joseph, could ensure their safe arrival in the City of David.

What disturbing news are you dealing with today? Taxes? Covid? Inflation? Job security? Illness? Betrayal? Life is difficult and we will all experience seasons where it feels as though it gets more difficult by the day. But the same God who used a pagan Caesar's decree to move His people to Bethlehem so that His Son could be born to fulfill His Word is still upon the throne of the universe. What is more, He has adopted you as His child. There is no news that surprises Him, and there is nothing you are facing that can truly harm you. As one of His peculiar people, no decree or law or "accident" has come your way that has not first passed through His omniscient watch. Take heart, dear reader – you are only seeing your story earth-side. Heaven's perspective, once fully revealed, will prove beyond any shadow of a doubt that He works all things together for good to them that love Him, to them who are called according to His purpose.

-- D. Murcek

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

When Dead Dogs Sit

II Samuel 9:7-8: ¶And David said unto him, Fear not: for I will surely shew thee kindness for Jonathan thy father's sake, and will restore thee all the land of Saul thy father; and thou shalt eat bread at my table continually.

And he bowed himself, and said, What is thy servant, that thou shouldest look upon such a dead dog as I am?

Mephibosheth was five years old when both his father and grandfather died at the Battle of Mount Gilboa. When the report about the deaths of Saul and Jonathan came from Jezreel, Mephibosheth's nurse took him and fled in panic. In her haste, the child had fallen, or been dropped upon fleeing. Since then, he was unable to walk. In order to fulfill his covenant with Jonathan, David wished to exercise loving-kindness toward any survivors of the house of Saul, and so exalted the crippled exile to sit at David's table "as one of the king's sons". Here was a man that by genealogy would have been considered an enemy of the king. Instead of an immediate execution he is adopted and ensconced as a prince.

It shouldn't take much discernment for any of us to see ourselves in this portrait of God-like mercy. We, like Mephibosheth, were "without strength" fearing the condign wrath of the King of kings. But to our amazement, unmerited favor was shown to us in our unworthy state. What grace is this, that impoverished, impotent beggars as we should find ourselves seated at the king's table? And there, no longer clothed in the threadbare habiliments of our contrived self-righteousness, but gloriously appareled in the "garments of salvation". We, who with Adam, were crippled by a fall have been wondrously restored and made to "sit together in heavenly places" with our royal Benefactor, as a host of ministering spirits attend to our every wish.

The determined Syrophenician mother made her way through the apostolic barriers to find her place at the feet of Christ only to have her request seemingly dismissed with the curt response, "for it is not meet to take the children's bread, and to cast it unto the dogs" This off-putting remark was only meant as a test of her importunity—a test she passed by acknowledging her debased condition and begging for some crumbs from the bounteous table of God's infinite mercy.

The good news is that there is room at His table where dead dogs can yet sit, enjoying the newfound status of "sons and daughters" of the living God.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing; and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Lasting Motivation

For the love of Christ constraineth us; ...

2 Corinthians 5:14

In every task that we do, there is usually some form of motivation that moves us to action. The motivation might be financial gain, pride in doing well, desire to improve in some area of our life, a sense of fear, a need for acceptance, or a host of other reasons. Oftentimes if our motivation dwindles, our effort will also diminish. In our Christian service, thankfulness for what God has done in His plan of salvation should move us to serve Him; but God's love is what put that plan in motion, and the love of Christ should be the root of all of our service to Him.

The constraining and compelling love of Christ is what totally transformed Saul of Tarsus into Paul the Apostle. Prior to his conversion on the road to Damascus, Paul was constrained by his religion. He was motivated to eradicate anything he perceived as damaging to his religion. In his testimony, he reveals that positional pride and profit were the motivating factors that caused him to rise above his peers. Paul's zeal was so blinding that he thought he was doing God's work by persecuting Christians and destroying their churches. That driving motivation was divinely redirected as he was on his way to arrest Christians, when Paul was suddenly overwhelmed by the presence of Jesus. When his name is called out by the Lord Himself, the soon-to-be apostle to the Gentiles inquires "Who art thou, Lord?" Realizing the voice was that of Jesus, Paul trembles and asks, "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" What an amazing thought, that the One Whom Paul persecuted, was not only willing to forgive him, but now called him to work for the advancement of what he once tried to destroy! Engulfed and energized by this heavenly love, the apostle embarked on a mission that would change the world.

So, what is it that motivates us to serve the Lord? If it is the praise of others, that will not satisfy. If we serve thinking that we will earn God's favor, we will be disillusioned. If we serve out of obligation, it will become a burden. Even if we serve because of compassion for others, we must remember that God is the author of that love, and that we are only able to love Him and others because He first loved us.

Take time today and meditate on what occurred on Mount Calvary and relish the thought that in His love for us, Jesus was pouring out His blood. Then, as we tell others about a God who so loved the world, we will be motivated to speak from experience.

J. Ekis

Rejoicing in order

Notwithstanding in this rejoice not, that the spirits are subject unto you; but rather rejoice, because your names are written in heaven.

Luke 10:20

As He had done previously with the twelve apostles, in this chapter Jesus sent out another seventy of His disciples to proclaim the good news of the kingdom, with the power to heal as a sign of God's authority upon them. They returned with joy, proclaiming, "Lord, even the devils are subject unto us through thy name." As Jesus replied, reinforcing His authority to give them such power over the enemy, He followed with this admonition in our text. These seventy reacted like most of us would in the case of being able to accomplish something that we never were able to do before, let alone to accomplish the truly miraculous. Jesus did not discourage their rejoicing in such bestowed authority and ability, but did put it into perspective. It is one thing to be able to accomplish great feats, in this case, of spiritual strength. However, the power to do is not as important as the privilege to be. So Jesus reminds them that their relationship with the heavenly Father, signified by their names written in the Lamb's book of life in heaven, is a far greater thing to rejoice about than even these powerful spiritual victories. There would be no source for the power to do, without their privilege to be the sons and servants of God.

Mankind is often wrapped up in pursuing the accomplishment of great things. Yet if our desire for accomplishment is our end goal, so that we would be recognized by others, we will miss the mark of true satisfaction. But if we value our greatest treasure of knowing and being known of our heavenly Father, we will understand in perspective the value of accomplishing His will for His glory. In so doing, we fulfill the purpose for which He made us, and we therefore can rejoice in the satisfaction of that knowledge. Let us therefore rejoice in things in His ordained order, so that even if the works are not always manifested, the blessed relationship sustains our joy.

Come down

O come, let us worship and bow down: let us kneel before the LORD our maker. For he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand.

Psalm 95:6-7

This is the second of two invitations in this psalm. The first is to come, let us sing unto the Lord, with thanksgiving and making a joyful noise. With the first invitation the psalmist lifts us up with him unto God, praising and thanking Him. Why? He lists the reasons – for His steadfast salvation, His greatness, His highness, His over-arching creative power, and His personal ownership of His creation. Then, as if the contemplation of all these reasons for praise and the majesty of the Lord has been allowed to sink down and have its effect on the inward musings of the heart, the psalmist utters the second invitation, to come with him from the heights of praise down to the low place, and to worship and bow down, and kneel before the Lord our maker. Why? Because in His highness He is *our* God, and in our lowness we are *His* people, and are cared for by Him as a shepherd cares for his sheep, kept close by his protective hand. The sheer recognition of the chasm between the majesty of the Creator and the simple and sinful lowliness of His beloved creatures is enough to cause the psalmist, and those of us who will come and follow, to take our rightful place upon our knees and worship Him. The true spirit of worship moves us to bring our bodies into the outward position that represents our inward attitudes of heart and soul as we recognize the vast spiritual difference between our state and His. This same contrast between praise and worship occurs in John's vision of heaven's throne room, while the heavenly beasts rise up with glory and honor and thanks unto Him, and the elders fall down and worship Him that liveth for ever and ever (Revelation 4:9-11). So let us answer the invitation of the psalmist, and recognize the parallel admonition of James to "humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and he shall lift you up" (James 4:10).

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Bad Zeal, Good Zeal

Acts 8:3: As for Saul, he made havock of the church, entering into every house, and haling men and women committed them to prison

When Paul made his list of things of which he once boasted, he included this description, "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church". He was certain that he was doing "God service". Oh the delusion of unbelief! "Wisdom is justified of all her children." One can picture this supercilious pharisee officiously demanding warrants for the arrest of the heretic Christians and gleefully committing them to imprisonment and then torturesome deaths. And all the while sating his conscience with the unfounded satisfaction that he was acting under the authority of the Almighty.

This same folly has been repeated in other epochs as well. The Spanish Inquisition was culpable for the most heinous forms of torture and death ever devised. Deluded priests were doing what they were sure was God's will in purging the church from the heretical protestants. We currently observe the Islamic radicals beheading the infidels who reject the Koran. Honor killings within Hindu and Islamic communities are committed by misguided zealots who intend to enforce their morality by the edge of a sword.

What a glad resolution to the case of the madman persecutor, Saul of Tarsus. Galatians 1:23 ...he which persecuted us in times past now preacheth the faith which once he destroyed. As is the situation with us all who have found the Lord, what we once were, we are no longer. So Paul who was once feverishly invading the houses of believers in search of evidence that could condemn them to death, had become a welcomed guest who zealously bore the glad tidings that offered the promise of eternal life. Acts 20:20: And how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publickly, and from house to house.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Joseph

And Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife...

– Matthew 1:24 –

There is precious little written about Joseph in the Scriptures. We can understand why. The Spirit obviously does not want us misunderstanding his role as earthly guardian and father-figure to the Son of God. This being understood, what the Spirit has chosen to share with us reveals a man whose character we would all do well to adopt as our own.

We know that Joseph was a carpenter (Matthew 13:55). Carpentry is a highly skilled occupation. A good carpenter is creative, industrious, and intelligent. Joseph possessed all of the requisite talents of his craft, and probably more.

Joseph was just (Matthew 1:19). He consistently looked to do what was right and good. His integrity more than mattered to him.

Joseph was compassionate. He was not willing to make Mary a public example (Matthew 1:19). Under the natural (albeit mistaken) assumption that Mary had been unfaithful during their betrothal, he had every right to broadcast her shame such that his own character be not impugned. But he was minded to put her away privily. No need to confound his heartache with revenge. She could go away quietly, and he would nurse his wounded spirit in secret. This was the most compassionate course.

Joseph was contemplative. He thought on these things (Matthew 1:20). Both words and actions need to be resolute. A fool will quickly utter all his mind. Mere reaction is never good. Think, grasp, comprehend, resolve, do. This was Joseph.

Joseph was obedient and courageous. The angel in the dream told him to fear not, but to take Mary as his wife because she carried the Messiah. That obviously had enormous implications for Joseph both immediately and for years to come. Immediately, his own integrity would now be maligned. In the coming years, how could he play father to the Son of God? All these things and more were no doubt swirling about in his heart and mind. Notwithstanding, he did as the angel had bidden (Matthew 1:21).

Joseph was a son of David (Matthew 1:20). It certainly did not feel that way in Nazareth in imperial Rome. No palace, no money, no power. Ah, but the inward man from Heaven's perspective! If God had chosen David to lead His people Israel for a singular purpose (1 Sam. 13:14), how much more can we safely assume that He likewise found a man after His own heart to entrust with the raising of His only begotten Son?

God executes His greatest works in obscurity through humble, unassuming vessels. Such was Joseph. Lord, make us likewise. -- D. Murcek

The Gravitational Pull of the Cross

And I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto me.

John 12:32

One of the strongest forces in the natural world is the pull of gravity. Every object, whether God-made or man-made, is pulled to the center of the earth. There are interferences that prevent that from happening, but once the interference is removed, an object will be pulled downward. Gravity not only pulls the acorn from a mighty oak tree, but it also eventually pulls down the tree itself. There is another attractive force that impacts and pulls at the hearts of men and women, that being the cross of Jesus Christ the Savior of the world.

Because of Adam's transgression, mankind has been subjected to the curse and alienated from God the Creator. The Lord in His infinite mercy devised a plan of providing forgiveness of sin and eternal life, thereby reinstating His relationship with mankind. The pull of the cross places us in a position where we can find a true relationship with God. Because Jesus' crucifixion was payment for the sins of world, the impact and significance of His sacrifice affects all of mankind. By pouring Himself out in His substitutional death on the cross, the Savior fills the void caused by the fall of Adam. Man's longing for love, hope, and purpose is ultimately satisfied by what Jesus did. What love is greater than Jesus leaving heaven and coming to give His life for the sins of the world? All of the temporary hopes in this life cannot compare to the eternal hope we receive by trusting Jesus. And our sense of purpose can only be fulfilled by finding that for which He created us.

Peter and Paul, Nicodemus and the Roman centurion, Zacchaeus and the maniac of Gadara represent just of a few of the biblical characters who had different backgrounds and different needs, yet they found the common solution by being drawn to the One who was lifted up. Down through the ages, countless people have turned from the unfulfilling attraction of this world to find unspeakable joy because of the pull of Calvary.

But, the draw of the cross does not cease on the day of conversion; it is continually drawing us deeper and closer to Him. Remembering the Lord's suffering for our sins helps to remind us of His amazing love and grace. When we experience the fellowship of His suffering, we are made conformable to His death, and we will continue to apprehend that for which we are apprehended of Christ. Today, yield to the Savior who continues to draw us to Him.

J. Ekis

Joy to the World!

*And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people...
– Luke 2:10 –*

My favorite Christmas carol is not really a Christmas carol! Isaac Watts' poetic intent was to celebrate the triumphant coming of the Christ, not His nativity. But that should not stop us from enjoying the classic in the context of our Lord's incarnation...

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King!
Let every heart prepare him room, and Heav'n and Nature sing
And Heav'n and Nature sing, and Heav'n, and Heav'n and Nature sing!*

I love the fact that in our modern Christ-denying world, Watts' devout and Scripture-rich homage of our Savior can still be heard playing in department stores, restaurants, and on secular radio stations during the Christmas season. Alas, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached! And Hell no doubt suffers a headache as thoughtful hearts must annually stop and consider the only pathway to true joy.

As lost sinners, it is impossible to know lasting joy in a cursed world. Do you remember being lost? Do you recall how transient and momentary happiness felt? Was it not one of the nagging symptoms of your alienated condition that drove you to seek for something deeper? Nothing was truly satisfying, was it? Even the best moments had a shadowy cloud over them, reminding us that the elation of the minute would sometime soon be met with the dampening sorrow of life under the sun.

But then the gospel came! We never knew that true fulfillment could be so richly experienced until we received the gift of everlasting life from the Word made Flesh. This well of life springing up within us is deep and abiding. No man can take from us the joy of our salvation. Trouble may endure for the night, but joy cometh in the morning. He hath turned our mourning into dancing. Our hearts now continuously and supernaturally meet out Paul's inspired admonition – rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say, rejoice!

The lost world around us cannot know this joy without bowing before the incarnate Son of God. Let us remember that joy is infectious. If we permit our joy to overflow, surely our lost friends, associates, family, and acquaintances will covet this gladness of heart for themselves. It is really only the blood-bought child of God that can say in the fullest experiential sense, "Merry Christmas!" Let us, like the shepherds of old, publish abroad the good tidings of great joy that our wonderful Lord has prepared for all people. -- D. Murcek

Jesus the Christ

*And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Juda, art not the least among the princes of Juda:
for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.
Matthew 2:6*

The visit of the wise men searching to worship one who was “born King of the Jews” was troubling to Herod and, therefore, all Jerusalem. One interesting aspect of Herod’s reaction was that he demanded of the chief priests and scribes to know where Christ should be born. Although he didn’t know the prophecy of the birthplace, he evidently knew enough to connect his visitors’ description with Israel’s long expectation of the coming Christ. Matthew’s account then goes on to tell of Herod’s diabolical ploy, attempting to use the wise men to lead him to the one that he deemed a threat instead of a savior. The intimation is that the self-centered Herod had no understanding of the Christ prophesied throughout the Hebrew scriptures or His benefit to Israel. He only regarded Him, although at this point a babe, as one more to challenge his own ill-achieved position.

Although Herod was generally a madman, it is intriguing to contemplate what he might have done if his counselors had continued to read Micah’s prophecy, revealing just after this another important truth about Christ – “whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting.” Might even a madman pause about what he was intending, if he had understood that Christ is eternal, and therefore God with us (Matthew 1:23)? This one born of David’s line was not just a genealogical heir and coming rival for the throne. He was in fact the Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), come to redeem His people and bring light to the Gentiles (Isaiah 60:3; Luke 2:32). To determine evil upon Him was to attack the Creator and Judge of all. Therefore, Herod could do nothing to harm the Christ without His permission.

As we celebrate His incarnation, let us not miss the whole message, as Herod did, nor only, as many, sentimentally view the lowly babe as simply a special child. Let us instead recognize that in Him “dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9). Then have a blessed Christmas.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Jesus, Lord At Thy Birth

Psalms 72:9:-11 They that dwell in the wilderness shall bow before him; and his enemies shall lick the dust. The kings of Tarshish and of the isles shall bring presents: the kings of Sheba and Seba shall offer gifts. Yea, all kings shall fall down before him: all nations shall serve him.

These arcane references, penned by King David, pointed to a night 1000 years removed from the time of its writing. Behold now these two groups of worshippers gathered at the feet of the savior of the world; two groups so diametrically opposed yet, for that moment, wondrously united in common homage.

First, we have a glimpse of the shepherds as "they that dwell in the wilderness" bowing before that lowly crib in the place Micah 4:8 calls "migdal edar: the tower of the flock". They were no doubt poor but not uneducated, for these were the Levitical shepherds who were charged with the ancient responsibility to herd the Passover lambs. For many centuries their menial task was to care for those spotless lambs that would be presented for the expiation of sin. It was with particular fascination they came to behold the One who was born that would soon render their toilsome employment unnecessary by the sacrifice of Himself.

Second, who could have ever imagined a day where Gentile kings, from the far reaches of the known world, would come bearing gifts and paying tribute to the One who would, in His time, sublimate all earthly potentates under His benevolent subjugation. In light of this text, we may be making a grievous miscalculation in assigning three kings as to the number of visitants to the Bethlehem crib that night. Those who were so accustomed to being honored knew how to show the proper respect to the King of all kings. Matthew chooses the same description of their adoration as David does in this psalm: they "fell down, and worshipped him" and "they presented unto him gifts".

It was so appropriate that the Holy Spirit would choose David to convey this imagery, for in these two groups we see the blending of the Good Shepherd and the King of all kings. What better writer than the erstwhile Shepard boy who became the king of Israel.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Gifts

*For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance.
– Romans 11:29 –*

It is fitting that the season that celebrates the incarnation of the Son of God is marked by gift-giving. After all, the wisemen brought the Christ child gifts, presenting Him of their treasures, gold, and frankincense, and myrrh. But more significantly, we are reminded that God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

Our God is a giving God. He is more than generous. The New Testament bears this out exhaustively. Jesus told us that the quality of God's gifts to His children far surpasses that of any earthly father (Mt. 7:11). James reiterates that every good gift is from above and directly from His hand (Ja. 1:17). Our salvation is a gift from God (Rom. 6:23), and one that is by grace (Eph. 3:7). It is so overwhelmingly precious that Paul designates it "an unspeakable gift" (2 Cor. 9:15). This salvation is comprised of multiple other gifts – those being Christ Himself (John 4:12), Christ's righteousness imputed to us (Rom. 5:17), and the Holy Ghost Himself living inside of us (Acts 2:38).

But God also benevolently individualizes His gift-giving. Each of us is graced with a vast array of multiplied and personalized gifts from our Creator. They are spiritual gifts (Rom. 12:6), resident and woven aspects of your personal makeup, specially designed and packaged in a box called "you". The variety and diversity of spiritual gifts among the people of God is nothing short of astounding. Some are gifted with meekness, others with boldness. Some have received the ability to help, others to lead. Certain in the body have a special knack to encourage, or to inspire, or to assist, or to discern, or to articulate, or to praise, or to sing, or to listen, etc., etc., etc. All of us are designed and bestowed with these gracious impartations from our Lord, not to focus them upon ourselves or whittle them away upon our own self-serving endeavors, but to robustly and resolutely exercise them for Him and upon others (1 Pet. 4:10).

Paul exhorted Timothy to neglect not the gift that was in him (1 Tim. 4:14). We would all do well to heed the inspired advice as intended for us personally. The Creator of the universe has a litany of things He wants accomplished, and He has gifted you, specifically, to be his instrument toward those ends. Have you buried your Lord's talent, or are you actively using your gifts? Let us take inventory, and then may we ensure that we are employing the gifts He has given us to the fullest extent possible until He calls us home.

He Sent Redemption

He sent redemption unto his people: he hath commanded his covenant for ever: holy and reverend is his name.

Psalm 111:9

Redemption, deliverance, and rescue all describe a circumstance of being moved from an unfavorable or threatening situation to a position of peace and security. Throughout our lives we probably all have experiences where we were rescued. Situations do not always have to be dire in order to appreciate the feeling of being rescued. Someone coming to our assistance, even in mild distress, can teach us to value redemption.

Throughout the Bible, whether individually or nationally, the theme of redemption is demonstrated many times over. In the book of Exodus there are multiple times where the Israelites were delivered by God's divine hand. From the shores of the Red Sea, through the Wilderness of Sinai, to the banks of the Jordan River, God proved His power to redeem. Bitter water sweetened by a tree, bread fallen from heaven, gushing water from a rock, these divine interventions delivered Israel from deprivation while refreshing them to continue their journey. The books of Joshua and Judges continue to detail the pattern of God rescuing His chosen ones. Further on in the historical and prophetic books, a shepherd boy defeats a giant soldier; three Hebrews are untouched by a fiery furnace; a wise man safely spends a night in a den of lions; and invading army are destroyed by the death angel. All of these circumstances demonstrate, whatever the need, there is a God who is able to deliver. In verse six of today's Psalm, the writer summarizes God's delivering acts by saying: "He hath shewed his people the power of his works."

As we celebrate the Christmas season, we are reminded of God's greatest act of redemption. At a very dark period of time in history, and at the darkest time of the year, the Light of the World arrived in the obscure town of Bethlehem. Though King of Kings, he became the Son of Man, that he might bear our griefs and carry our sorrows. His many miracles produced hope while proving that he was the Christ, the Savior of the world. Yet it pleased the Lord to bruise him and make his soul an offering for sin. This one act produced redemption for all who believe.

Today there are many things from which the Lord continues to deliver mankind. Sorrows and grief can be replaced by the joy he brings. When we experience loneliness, the One who came to be the friend of sinners continues to be the friend that sticks closer than a brother. Whatever our need, we can find our fulfillment in the redemption that is in Christ Jesus!

~ J. Ekis

Private Lessons

But without a parable spake he not unto them: and when they were alone, he expounded all things to his disciples.

Mark 4:34

During our school years, there may have been times when we did not understand a lesson, and the teacher would take us aside to further explain that lesson. Focused on the teacher's instruction without the usual classroom distractions, the content of the lesson could become clearer. Sometimes, a tutor would be secured to help with learning a subject. Teacher-student ratio can have great impact on the quality of education.

The parables Jesus taught had a twofold purpose. Not only did they teach heavenly spiritual lessons, but they were also designed to reveal truth to humble listeners while confounding the proud self-righteous leaders. The parables, as with all of God's truth, sometimes need more instruction to further reveal the depth of meaning. God's word is compared to a two-edged sword, one side of the sword is the easily received truth of the word, while the other side requires deeper insight and instruction to see more enriching truth. Accepting the truth at face-value is good, but private meditation and Holy Spirit instruction to enhance our understanding of the greater riches of that truth is better. The apostles had a great privilege in not only seeing our Lord's miracles and hearing His teaching, but also being selectively tutored by Him. In all the busyness of His ministry, Jesus took time to be intimately alone with the twelve to further instruct them.

Today, churches provide instruction opportunities through Sunday School, Bible studies, and preaching. These venues can provide not only Biblical information, but also inspiration that moves us to love and follow our Lord's commands. But our walk should go deeper than just this, we also need to find time to be alone in the Lord's presence. Whenever possible, we must find that private place, block out all the distractions of this life, and sit quietly and patiently in the presence of the Lord, while opening our ears and hearts to hear Him expound the depths of His Word. When we escape to be alone with the Lord, it is there *in His light, we shall see light*. The privilege of those times of private instruction should inspire us to spend more time alone, listening to the Lord's words of wisdom.

Find that time and place to be alone with Jesus today, and while there, He can expound His word to you.

J. Ekis

Kingdom perspective

*And he said unto Jesus, Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom.
Luke 23:42*

Although these words spoken by the thief from his cross have been often addressed, normally it is with respect to his opportunity for repentance and the abundant mercy of the Lord. While these are extremely worthy topics, there is another aspect of this scene to contemplate. The stark reality of the moment was that the thief and Jesus were both dying on crosses. From a purely material perspective, like that perhaps of a Roman soldier below, there was nothing to discuss. Yet it is obvious that what the thief experienced and what he saw in Jesus completely turned his perspective from the present loss of life to the possibility of spiritual life. In this hideous state, he was able to apprehend that Jesus possessed a kingdom that was not of this world, as He had hours before this moment explained in the dull ears of Pontius Pilate. Throughout Jesus' ministry He preached the kingdom, for which John had previously prepared the audience. Yet Jesus had found the Pharisees in need of an explanation that the kingdom at that time "cometh not with observation" but "is within you" (Luke 17:20-21). He had to explain to the learned Nicodemus how "that which is born of the flesh is flesh; and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3:6). Yet this common thief had now developed the perspective of the spiritual nature of the kingdom of Christ. He now shared this perspective with those wise men before, who when they had found "the young child with Mary his mother, [they] fell down, and worshipped him" (Matthew 2:11), even though the circumstances presented no outward evidence of a kingdom. In both cases faith had to trump the bare circumstances.

Even so now, we also join them in this pursuit, as Peter exhorts: "Nevertheless we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness" (II Peter 3:13). It was prophesied through Daniel of the Son of man: "And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Daniel 7:14). For although the kingdom is primarily spiritual, it will also overcome and convert the natural, when the "kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 11:15). Therefore, we live in it because its Lord lives in us, until the redemption of the purchased possession (Ephesians 1:14). What a glorious day that is and will be!