

Christmas Eve 95

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1995.
Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

The story we just read - is it a fairy tale - just a beautiful story with no basis in fact? Luke certainly believed it was true. His gospel was probably written about 80 years after the birth of Jesus. He gathered information from eyewitness accounts - maybe even the Virgin Mary. He used earlier documents like the Gospel of Mark. He probably used a written source containing sayings of Jesus. He evaluated oral traditions handed down fifty years by the first Christians. Luke was a careful historian but he made no attempt to give an objective, unbiased account of the life of Jesus. He was convinced Jesus is the Son of God. He was convinced Jesus was raised from the dead. He believed that the baby born in Bethlehem is the Savior of the whole world. He was a committed believer, not an impartial historian.

Luke goes to great lengths to place the birth of Jesus within the context of world history. Caesar Augustus, the first Roman Emperor, reigned from 27 BC to AD 14. He decreed that all the world should be registered. This registration took place, Luke says, when Quirinius governed Syria which then included Judea. Quirinius was a real person. Secular historians tell us his full name was Publius Sulpicius Quirinius. He died about 30 years after the birth of Jesus.

So Mary, nine months pregnant, traveled 90 miles with Joseph - from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. "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."

A Palestinian Christian named Justin living 150 years after the birth of Jesus tells us that Jesus was born in a cave used to shelter farm animals. When we visited the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem nearly two years ago we descended a flights of stairs into a cavern. Ancient tradition identifies the cave as the place Jesus was born. I was deeply moved as I knelt there. This is very probably the actual place God in Christ was born.

I give you this historical background with some misgivings. People don't come to church on Christmas Eve to hear a lecture on history. We come for many reasons but not to hear lectures on history. Yet history is at the heart of the Christian faith. Christians refuse to put the story of Christ's birth in the same story as legends, myths and fairy tales. Christians believe that God acts in history. Christians believe that God acted supremely in history in the birth of Jesus.

Something happened on that first Christmas that changed God. Something happened that changed the way we understand God. Before the first Christmas most people, when they thought of God, thought exclusively of power. Even today most people, whether or not they believe in God, think of God primarily in terms of power. And they think that power is about the domination of others, through threats and violence if necessary.

Christmas changes this conception of God. The birth of Jesus to Mary in the stable in Bethlehem links our thoughts of God, not with power, but with weakness. As a result God and God's people

have a special concern for those who are weak and defenseless. The Christmas story tells us that God entered human history as a baby. As a result God and God's people have a deep commitment to children and to the care of children. The Christmas story tells us that in Bethlehem God became homeless. As a result God and God's people want homeless people to have decent places to live. On the first Christmas God became an outcast. As a result God and God's people seek to include outcasts. On that first Christmas God entrusted himself to the care of a human family. As a result God and God's people encourage and support families.

What I'm trying to say is that, if it's true, the Christmas story requires a response on the part of God's people. The story requires God's people to make costly commitments to the weak, the homeless, the outcast, to children and families. It requires something more than an emotional response. More than merely an intellectual response. It requires an ethical response.

And it requires a response of worship. In Tolstoi's, *War and Peace*, one of the most memorable scenes describes the night at Russian Headquarters when a messenger brought to Kutuzov, the old Commander-in-Chief, the first news of Napoleon's retreat from Moscow. After years of terrific strain and agony, the news sounded incredible. The messenger finished his report and then waited for a response. Finally, after a long silence, Kutuzov turns his head to the icons of Jesus on the wall and he begins to pray out loud. He cries, "O Lord, my Creator, Thou hast heard our prayer. Russia is saved! Thank thee O Lord." And then he wept.

Today the messenger of the Gospel brings "good news of great joy for all people." The message requires a response. Not just an ethical response but a worshipful response. If the Christmas story is fantasy, if it's not based in history, I don't believe there's any hope for human history. But if it's true, it requires a worshipful response as well as an ethical response. "Great God, my Lord and Creator, you have heard our prayers. The whole world is saved."

Let us pray: Lord Jesus Christ, help us to get our thinking straight about Christmas. May we see it not as a fairy tale from the past but as an historical event that has changed the world.

Jesus - born in a stable, may we honor you by serving those who are homeless now.

Jesus - a refugee in Egypt, may our concern for today's refugees be part of our worship of you.

Jesus - bringer of peace, may our striving for peace in the world (especially in Bosnia) be part of our Christmas offering to you.

Jesus - who received gifts from wise men, help us to give ourselves to you: that you may make us the kind of people you want us to be: that you may show us the kind of life you want us to lead.

Jesus - who gave all for us, accept our lives and set them on fire with love for you and for all humankind.

We pray, O-Lord, especially for all the children in the world who do not have homes; those who are hungry, sick or sad; all children in hospitals, and all whose parents are sick or unable or unwilling to care for them.

And now, as Christ our Savior has taught us, let us humbly pray...