

WHEN GOD WAS A CAVE DWELLER

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

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December 24, 1999

"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." Luke 2:7

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

As I began preparing this sermon weeks ago, thinking about Mary, Joseph, and the infant Jesus, a brief news article, entirely unrelated to the Christmas story, captured my imagination and detoured my preparation. Fossil remains of a man, woman, and new born baby at least 20,000 years old were found in a cave in Iraq. The three had been "buried" on a bed of flowers. Someone had taken time to gather wild flowers and place them on the floor of the cave. We know very little about this nameless family. They lived through the dark cold of an ice-age winter. They lived to Spring and the blooming of wild flowers. Then they died. A man, a woman, and a new born baby at the dawn of human history. What caused their death? Had the woman died in childbirth? Who gathered the flowers? Did they gather flowers with tears in their eyes as many of us, this week, have sent flowers to the Hostettters and Wallers on the tragic deaths of Rebecca and Katie? Why were their bodies placed on a bed of flowers? Did someone hope they'd awaken and rise to new life one day just as we trust Rebecca and Katie will? **Scientists tell us our prehistoric ancestors lived in caves.** I wish we knew more about our prehistoric family. One thing we *do* know - they were artists. I wish I could project on the walls of our sanctuary pictures our prehistoric ancestors painted on cave walls - galloping bison, leaping reindeer and long extinct woolly mammoths. Painted in the "vibrating brilliance" of an impressionistic style. Painted in gleaming reds, blacks and yellows. Painted in dark caves by the light of torches. Of all the wonders of the ancient past few make a stronger appeal to my imagination than these paintings from 20,000 years ago in caves. At the dawn of human history our prehistoric ancestors were born, painted, and died in caves.

According to the Christmas story the history of the human race began anew in a cave. The Christmas Gospel shows another man, woman and newborn child in a cave. Luke writes, "(The Virgin Mary) gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a

manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” From ancient times Christians have identified a cave in Bethlehem as the birthplace of Christ. Even today old houses in Bethlehem are built over caves in the limestone rock, caves still used as stables. Two thousand years ago a homeless couple crept underground into one of these dark caves after the doors of the crowded inn were shut in their faces. Jesus Christ, God the Word, was born in a cave. Like the caves of our prehistoric ancestors, I imagine its interior was lit by torches. I see the shadow shapes of animals - ox and ass and lambs - projected on the cave walls where Jesus was born. Just as our human ancestors lived in caves at the dawn of human history, God the Son became a cave-man on the morning of God’s new creation. Like our prehistoric ancestors, Jesus was an artist. He came to restore the obliterated image of God in humankind. God created humankind in God’s image to reflect God’s love. The Triune God - Father, Son and Holy Spirit - unity in diversity - created us in all our diversity to live together as one family in peace. God created us to know God personally, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. But early in our history we turned from the living God. We ignored God. We excluded God from our plans. We did! Our human family did, from our cave dwelling prehistoric ancestors to our cyber-exploring modern family. We turn from life to death, from light to the darkness, from peace to war, from unity in diversity to ethnic cleansing. We always have! We still do! Too often God is only an after thought. The Triune God, however, is the source of all life - apart from God we go down the ways of death. God is the source of our reasoning abilities - apart from God we commit irrational acts and make irrational decisions. God is the source of love - apart from God we live in fear and alienation. God is the source of our identity as human beings - apart from God we don’t know who we are. We don’t know why we’re here. We don’t know our final destination as individuals or as a species. God’s image in us has become terribly defaced, obscured and nearly obliterated. Yet God still values us. After thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands of years, God continues to value our fallen race. God doesn’t throw us away. God comes to us in Jesus Christ. He comes like an artist to restore his image in us, to give us new life, to renew the human race.

Tonight we come to a cavernous sanctuary. Maybe ancestral memories of cave dwellings lead us to build cave like sanctuaries and beautify them with stained glass art. Maybe prehistoric ancestral memories have led us here. Stalactite lighting fixtures hang from the ceilings. Soon we'll light candles just as our cave-dwelling ancestors illumined their caves with torches. And tonight God tells us that the human story begins anew in a cave with the birth of Jesus. There's a theory in biology that says that the development of every human being, from conception to birth, recapitulates the entire history of human development. Every baby relives the entire biological history of the human race. The Christmas story tells us that God, in Christ's conception and birth, relives and redeems the entire history of humankind from prehistoric cave dwellers to astronauts.

The story of Jesus begins in a cave. Continue to read the story and you discover that after he died, Jesus was wrapped again in linen cloths and placed in a cave. On the third day Jesus rose from the dead and left the cave. The story of the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus is not a myth, not a fairy story, but the truth upon which Christians build our lives. His resurrection gives us hope ~~that the new creation begun at his birth is our destiny. Because of the birth, death and resurrection~~ of Jesus, Christians hope for the transformation of this world, *not escape from it*. Our hope is that evil in all its forms will be utterly eradicated. Past history will be redeemed. All the things that ever were will be made new. We hope for a new creation, a new heaven and a new earth, in which God is really honored as God, human beings are truly loving, and peace and justice reign on earth.

Tonight I invite us to believe, despite our unbelief, that no matter how bleak the world may sometimes seem, there is nonetheless a depth of love which is deeper than our despair, and that Love, born in a Bethlehem cave, will win in the end. Thanks be to God.

Glory to you, almighty God,
for you sent your only-begotten Son,
that we and all humanity might have new life.
Glory to you, Lord Jesus Christ,
for you became flesh and dwelt among us
to restore in us the obliterated divine image.
Glory to you, Holy Spirit,
for you direct and rule our lives.
Glory to you, almighty God,
and to your Son, Jesus Christ,
and to the Holy Spirit,
now and forever. Amen.