

Props – wrapped gift

“Bookends - Anticipation” – Part 1

This morning is the first Sunday of Advent. We’ve celebrated Thanksgiving and now we can focus on Christmas. This is a time of Anticipation – expectation for the birth of Christ. So....this has already been preached, and by those who are much more educated (and confident) than I am. How can I tell the story and make it fresh?

One of my favorite Christmas programs is “A Charlie Brown Christmas”. It first was shown in the mid ‘60s, so I’m sure most of you have seen it. The children are dancing and singing and waiting for Christmas. The end of the program shows the children’s Nativity Program. Linus quotes, “Peace on earth, good will toward men”. I considered showing it this morning, and allow that to be my message. I’m sure many of you would prefer that, but I didn’t think I could get away with it.

At this season, we generally focus on the peaceful manger scene-Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus laying in a manger, surrounded by the animals. “The cattle were lowing”. Don’t exactly know what a cow lowing sounds like, but by all the peaceful nativity scenes we’ve seen, it looks quiet and serene.

Watching the news this weekend the headlines are: yet another shooting in Colorado, ISIS – Brussels, Paris, Syria, poverty,

Strife in smaller countries that doesn’t even make the news, but has people suffering in poverty and persecution.

We cry out that there is no peace!

Here in America we have so much to be thankful for.

Yet, Grief – the death of loved one-whether this is the first year or many years – still leaves a hole in our lives.

We suffer from

Job loss

Divorce

Dysfunctional Families

Financial difficulties

There are a whole myriad of problems that make “celebration” difficult

Each year we have a repeat of the Christmas story. You’ve celebrated every Christmas for as many years as you are old. It becomes less meaningful.

I haven’t even mentioned Christmas vs Holiday – all the commercialism, rushing, trying to get everything done we feel we need to do – baking, wrapping, parties.

This morning I want us to grasp what really occurred when Christ came as a baby, to live with us on earth.

This beautiful season, we picture the infant in the manger, surrounded by his parents and the peaceful animals. We sometimes color the past and picture it as better than it actually was. In our heads, we know the nativity scene was not peaceful. This was a stable or cave where animals were kept. The manger was a feeding trough for the

animals. It was cold. There was no running water or electricity. If you've ever been on a farm or visited a local fair's animal stalls, you know animals smell! If you've ever been present when a woman is giving birth, it is generally not quiet and it is certainly messy. So, our vision of the nativity scene changes. It was not as we often picture it.

We pause, celebrating the birth of Christ.

But, life keeps moving on. Jesus grows up and becomes an adult. He has a ministry to fulfill. His life is not easy. He has no home of his own, no real possessions. He travels the dusty roads wearing sandals. He works in a carpenter shop. His hands are worn and his feet are dirty.

He suffered, was crucified and died for us, so that we could once again have a relationship with God.

The result of his first coming was salvation.

He was born to die

Sin separated us from God.

A way was determined to enable us to come before God

Reconcile us – mediator

Forgiveness – our sacrifice

Our Scripture this morning doesn't seem like it relates to the Nativity story. Yet, I feel it represents our world. Christ is warning us. He says, "There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and

tossing of the sea. People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world.”

The Message translation reads: It will seem like all hell has broken loose – sun, moon, stars, earth, sea, in an uproar and everyone all over the world is in a panic, the wind knocked out of them by the threat of doom, the powers-that-be quaking.

Doesn't this sound like the world we live in?

Christ came to defeat evil. By his death and resurrection, we are able to have a relationship with Him. Evil and death are defeated. However, he does not wish that any should be lost and so is waiting in anticipation of our acceptance of Him. We are to go out and evangelize the world.

Advent and the culmination of Christmas is not the end, it is just the beginning of His glorious reign. Christ warns us in these verses of what will happen. We are to be prepared.

“When you see these things begin to take place, stand up and lift your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” Again, the Message translates it, “And then – then! – they'll see the Son of Man welcomed in grand style—a glorious welcome! When all this starts to happen, up on your feet. Stand tall with your heads high. Help is on the way!

Advent is not just anticipation regarding Christ's birth, but anticipation of Christ's Second Coming, when he will restore creation to his original intention

At His second coming, he will be Priest and King, making His enemies His footstools

Advent is not just the past. It is also present – like the Jewish nation, we are anticipating and expecting the return of Christ.

We have much in common with New Testament Jews.

As we have recently studied in the “Epic of Eden” on Sunday morning and Wednesday evenings, the Bible is an unfolding story.

Fall in the Garden of Eden

Attempts at Restoration by God

Who continues to seek obedience from His people

They are rebellious and turn from Him

He allows them to face captivity or destruction

They ask forgiveness and are again reconciled with God

Then the circle repeats

Ever since the beginning, God loved us and continually sought to bring him back to himself. He made covenants with Abraham, Moses and David, promising to be with them if they were obedient.

The prophets of the Old Testament warned the people to trust in the Lord, who delivered, strengthened and restored his people. Yet they kept turning away from God. Eventually God withdrew his prophets and for over 400 years, there was not a word from God.

This was the period between the last Old Testament book of Malachi and the first New Testament book of Matthew. The Jews had been oppressed for hundreds of years. But although God's voice was at rest, His hands were busy building the stage upon which He would deliver His grandest, most eloquent, most moving speech – Jesus Christ.

When Malachi ends, the land of the Jews belonged to the Persian Empire. About a century later, Alexander the Great traveled through Asia Minor, eventually reaching Palestine and as far as Egypt. As Greece ascended, a common language was established. Unwittingly, Alexander was a tool in God's hand to prepare the world for the spread of the gospel. There was a universal language, in what was previously a fragmented world.

Then came the reign of the Romans, who brought civil organization and peace for a period of years.

During that time, the Jews translated the Old Testament into Greek, which made the Scriptures available to Jews who no longer spoke their ancestral language. This translation later became the Bible of the early church.

Though God spoke no new Scripture during this period, He still sovereignly preserved and confirmed the Word He had already spoken.

God is still working in the world today, as he was in the Israelites time. We, like the Israelites, question what is happening in the world?

God worked in the world at that time to accomplish His purpose. He is doing the same today. Even though we don't understand, or even see what he is doing, he is present in our world, working out his plan.

Advent is only the beginning. It doesn't end with Christmas and the birth of Christ.

There will be a second coming where Jesus will not come as a baby, but as a King.

Making all things new - Recreating Eden – the Culmination of His work - Death will be defeated

He has given us a new Promise.

In the meantime...

Don't know when

Christ is coming again to restore His creation.

Christ came so that we can have new life, not just so we can go to heaven, but here and now.

When we receive a gift, we don't leave it. I've brought a gift this morning. Should we just leave it here until after the season and then I'll take it home and put it in the closet?

No, we are curious to know what's inside. We want to open it. Children especially can't wait to dig into the gifts under the tree. There is excitement!

You know the songs and the stories, and you know what it's all about, but perhaps you've never unwrapped God's gift.

We must accept it. We need to open it, and then not leave our gift on the shelf, but let it change our lives. We have much to anticipate. He has work for us to do—feed the hungry, care for those less fortunate... share him with all we meet so that none should be lost. As Scripture tells us many times, the time is short. We need to be working—the fields are ready but the workers are few.

This Christmas, I invite you to ACCEPT HIS GIFT— Anticipate the great future yet to come. Join the “winning” team. Evil will be defeated. There will be no more refugees. Conflict may or may not be resolved in our time by governments and individuals, but it **will** be resolved by God upon His return.

While we wait expectantly, we can have a personal relationship with Him, and do our part to be His hands and feet here on earth. Be active in the world, sharing his love with everyone you meet, so that many more are won to him, and will be able to join him in his everlasting plan for peace and goodwill.

I believe God in this season of Advent is also expectant and anticipating. He is waiting for us to respond to His gift.

I'd like to share a story with you.

Joey was eight...and he lived in a poverty-stricken housing development. Some church buses made periodic runs through his neighborhood to gather children for church and other special events. The people invited him to a Christmas party. He would have 15 minutes to get dressed before the bus left for the church. Joey ran home and exploded with excitement to his mother. “There’s a party at the church this afternoon...and I’m invited.” He thought it was another Halloween costume party, so he and Mom went to work on his wardrobe. Fifteen minutes wasn’t much time, and their funds were more limited than their minutes. Mom had a great idea...

Why not go as a haystack? She put an old brown sweatshirt on Joey and stuffed it with weeds. They even put some of the straw on the outside of the sweatshirt...just to make it look real.

But Joey was more than surprised when the party turned out to be a Christmas play...not a costume party. He sulked around the fringes of the group until he heard the leaders say they couldn't find a manger.

"Can I help?" he asked. He was good at finding things. The parents explained to Joey that what they were looking for was a box full of hay where the baby Jesus could be laid. It seemed that someone had borrowed the prop...and how could they have an adequate Bethlehem drama without it?

Joey looked down at his costume...baggy brown sweatshirt with weeds stuffed in it and straw sticking out everywhere. "I could be your box of hay." He lay down on the floor and announced,

"I'll be your manger...let Jesus be born in me."

This Christmas season, give Christ a gift for Christmas. Give him the gift of yourself. Allow Jesus to be born in you. He has demonstrated his love for us down through the centuries. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall never die, but have everlasting life." He is not willing that any should be lost. Respond – say yes – open the gift he has given!