

December 6, 2020

Matthew 1: 18-21

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

“Just What We Need”

Whether we spend Christmas Eve this year in the quiet safety of our own homes experiencing worship online, or whether we reserve a place in-person in our sanctuary, the focus that night will be the beautiful reading from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke. We call it the Christmas Story and most of us know it by heart. The shepherds are there watching their flocks by night. A chorus of angels echoes through the dark sky with the message that we should not be afraid, for joy is coming to all the people. This will be the sign, a child will be born, wrapped in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger. Mary and Joseph are there and she, who we see with our mind’s eye lovingly holding her child, is pondering all these things in her heart. (Luke 2: 8-20) It just wouldn’t be Christmas without the Gospel of Luke chapter 2. From children’s pageants that reenact the drama to nativity sets that bring the Bethlehem scene into our own homes, our celebration of Christmas depends upon retelling the story we know so well.

The point I make is that for most of us, and for nearly every Christmas of our lives, the Gospel of Luke is the go-to scripture this time of year, but today we give the Gospel of Matthew its due. That’s right, there’s another story about the birth of Jesus and Matthew’s Gospel focuses our attention in a different direction. Matthew leaves the details of shepherds and their sheep, and of angels and their songs, and the soft glow of the manger for others. With the reading of Matthew’s Christmas story today, we discover that he will not let our celebration of Christmas be just about the birth of a baby. Now every birth brings the gift of life and that’s a day worth remembering and we do, even for ourselves remember it year after year, but the deeper gift that Matthew points us toward is what the Bethlehem birth means for our lives. The one who is born is Jesus the Messiah. This is what Matthew makes clear. His name is Emmanuel, “God is with us,” and because he is “God with us” he will save us from our sins. (Matt. 1:21) Christmas is about the presents, and the trees, and the holiday treats, and everything that glitters and is gold. All of that has its place. But none of that matters to Matthew if we do not acknowledge that Jesus is born to save us. Having said that, we can also say that it is unlikely any of us have included the need to be saved on our Christmas lists this year. If your family is like mine, we share lists at Christmas with website links and suggestions about what we’d like or what we want this year. I’m just being honest in recognizing that being saved has never made it on my Christmas list, how about you? And yet, the Gospel of Matthew is clear from the very beginning that Jesus comes to save us. Jesus is God with us, and God being with us is not just a nice religious phrase but the certainty that we are rescued, delivered, and set free from whatever cuts us off from a life with God. This is what we really need and this is what God gives. This is who Jesus is for us, the one who saves.

A conversation that comes up regularly in my circle of friends is, “Have you come across any shows or series that are good to watch?” Streaming services and cable networks have lots of options for series or movies, and I think we are more tuned in to that than ever before because the pandemic has given us more time at home. One short series I recently enjoyed is called, “The Queen’s Gambit.” The main character, Beth Harmon, lives in an orphanage as a girl, is adopted but then continues to experience many struggles in her relationships. The series is about her success at becoming a world grand master at the game of chess, but the real game is how she longs to be loved and accepted for who she is. Winning at chess matters to her but what she wants most is a life that has meaning, where she is loved and connected to others who care.

When we think about our lives it’s not so far-fetched to imagine ourselves on a chess board. In other words, we go through life making moves and counter moves with the hope we’ll ultimately win, that is discover a life with meaning and a life where we are loved. Unlike a board game, depending upon our own ability and know-how just isn’t enough. We can’t do it on our own. We need something and someone outside of ourselves to connect us to what is deeper and lasting. This is why the saving power in Jesus is so key for us. We don’t have to be perfect. We don’t have to get every life move right. Jesus comes with the presence of God, connecting us to an eternal love that isn’t dependent upon what we do or don’t do or what we know or don’t know. The word Matthew uses that catches us in all of this is sin. We don’t like thinking about that, especially at what is supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year, But, this is good news. If our sin is about the ways we are separated from God, the saving power of Jesus overcomes that brokenness. God is with us. We are with God. Fear doesn’t have to be the way but, instead, there is forgiveness and healing and peace. And so, this isn’t a game after all. This is as real and deep as it gets. Jesus is our Savior, and because God gives us this gift the joy we sing of at Christmas is not only possible but given to us. There’s a Christmas carol that may not be at the top of the carol chart but it’s message is right on. Here’s a look at the words from a verse of “Good Christian Friends”

*Good Christian friends rejoice  
with heart and soul and voice;*

*Now ye need not fear the grave:  
Jesus Christ was born to save!  
Calls you one and calls you all  
to gain his everlasting hall.  
Christ was born to save!  
Christ was born to save!*

If there is any part of us, and even if it means all of who we are, is feeling cut off or isolated this Christmas, Jesus is God's gift for us. First, we are forgiven and we are rescued right where we are. And then, we are gathered into the arms of a God who will never let us go. I think this is what Mary must have been pondering in her heart that day. The gospel places this truth in our hearts, too. What we want, what we long for, what we most need, is ours today. Yes, Christ was born to save!