

Rev. Larry Brown - Powell United Methodist Church

"Birth of a Savior"

My mother, Carole, was born on Christmas Day. There's nothing random about her name. The family story is that her mother, my grandmother, was in a Catholic hospital for the birth and she was going to name her new daughter, Judith. It's a lovely name but the maternity nurse, who happened to be a nun, would have nothing to do with that. When the nun asked for the baby's name my grandmother said, "Judith," and the nun said there was no way a sweet, little girl born on December 25th could have that name and besides, the nun said to my grandmother, "The moment your daughter was born there was a group down the hall singing Christmas carols. Your daughter's name has to be Carole." And that was that. My grandmother added an "e" to the end of mom's name just to make it a bit less obvious but my mom has been Christmas Carole her whole life. Having a birthday on the day when the world celebrates the birth of the Savior seems a little unfair. There's a lot happening on Christmas Day and folding a family birthday celebration into the mix can easily feel like an afterthought. More than once we've wondered if we should celebrate mom's birthday some other time of year, like in July. That really doesn't work very well, but no worries. My mom knows she is special to us every day of the year.

You probably haven't thought about Christmas lately, unless the credit card bills you received in January reminded you of it. We focus on the birth of Jesus in and around Christmas Day but then we quickly get on with life after the holiday season ends. Take note that today's gospel reading is from the second chapter of Luke. This is where we turn on Christmas Eve, reading Luke's beautiful story of the Bethlehem manger, when the angels sang and the shepherds came, glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. Do you remember what comes at the end of the Christmas story? Luke tells us Mary "pondered" everything "in her heart." It's obvious, I suppose, that Mary's pondering is Luke's way of telling us the birth of Jesus warrants our reflection. The birth of Jesus reaches far beyond the events of a single day. In fact, what happened on that first Christmas intersects with our lives not only in July but on every day of the year. Again, this points to what is obvious. The birth of Jesus is the beginning of the story. That's worth pondering. The life of Jesus demands both our reflection and our response. Think about it this way. Not only was there a baby born in the manger that day, a Savior entered the world. It's the birth of a Savior that pulls us back into Luke's second chapter today where he tells us what happened when Mary and Joseph took their newborn son to the temple. They went to participate in the customary religious practices that consecrated the life of their son to the purposes of God. I take a brief pause at this point to share that religious practices are not just what good church folks do when they are being the church. Over the years I've had many ask, "What's so important about doing all of this church stuff?" What's so important about coming to worship? Why do we keep the ancient practices of baptism and communion going? Why do we study the bible? What's the big deal with all of the gathering, and the serving, and the participating in mission, and why do we focus on making offerings and constantly lifting up the sharing of prayers? We do what we do, religiously speaking, because it's ultimately not about what we are doing. God is acting through us. God is involved in our religious lives. The rituals and the traditions are an opening through which God enters our lives, and in that process the presence of a Savior becomes known. A savior is born. Turning back to Luke's second chapter now, he moves quickly from the birth of Jesus to what happened in the temple because there must be no doubt that Jesus is the Christ, the one who comes to save us and the world. Here's the truth. The baby Jesus was born once. The reality of the Savior is a power that comes to life in us again and again. It's through the eyes of two old and wise souls, first Simeon and then Anna, that Luke shows us what it means to embrace a Savior.

Simeon had waited his whole life to see, as the scripture says, "the consolation of Israel." He needed to know that God would both lead and comfort God's people into the future. I'll never forget the oldest church member I've known. He was a retired physician and lived to be 107. One Sunday morning, in the congregation I was serving at the time and when he was just 105, we were talking about the plans for a big building project. As my old friend shook my hand at the sanctuary door following the service that day, he said, "Pastor, let's get together. I want to talk with you about the future." That was inspiring. I went to see him that very day. When a 105 year old man wants to talk to you about the future you don't put that off. How amazing that Simeon, even in his advanced age, was so full of expectation for what God was going to do. And then Anna, who was just as faithful and watchful. She spent her life in the temple worshipping and praying, deeply ready for what God would do. These old souls knew they were never too old to be cut off from the saving work of God. They expected it. They recognized it. They embraced Jesus when given the chance because he was more than the son born to Mary and Joseph. He was their Savior, given to them and to all, as a light that would save the world.

We tend to focus on Jesus as the one who saves us by getting us on the road to heaven. He's more than that. Simeon and Anna experienced the saving power in Jesus has reaching into the world. The power of our Savior emerges in our lives, too, connecting us to God's purposes far beyond just our individual lives. One place where this

impacts us is the way we think about and respond to others, especially those who are different from us. When we are ready to cut off or count out groups of people there's an unsettled feeling in us. We know it's not right. We know there should be some other way, and that's when the door opens and God's saving presence comes to life in us, again. Haven't you felt the need to re-evaluate your thinking when you realize ingrained attitudes categorically assume some are not worthy or acceptable? That's Jesus, our light, saving us. That's Jesus, our Savior, drawing near.

The preaching today isn't for the purpose of giving us something to do, except to invite us to ponder how it is, and where it is, and who it is that saves us every day. Saves us by offering comfort, saves us by softening hard hearts and opening closed minds, and saves us by guiding us to step forward in faith and to respond to others in love. There's a tradition of repeating the words of the psalmist when we say, ""This is the day the Lord has made..." (Ps. 118:24) We add to those words and say. "This is the day that the Lord is saving us, saving us again and again and again, in Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen."