

***“Yes, This Birth Is Important”***

A Sermon Shared with the Congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church

Sunday, December 24, 2017 at 10:30 a.m.

Advent 4 – Christmas Eve Communion

**Scripture Readings:** Psalm 96 (VU #816)

Luke 1:26-38

*(Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman)*

No matter how hard we try, we will not have the perfect Christmas tree or the flawless decorations, so relax and allow your spirit to be open to the joys and hopes of the season that are clearly there when you await them. If you still want to have that perfect Christmas, you have about 5 hours left to get to the stores and create it – maybe 6 if you leave church now!

Throughout Advent Catherine and I have invited you to embark on a spiritual holiday, to see this season not as a time captured by the busy-ness of shopping, sending cards, and making it to an array of parties, but rather as a time to be renewed through the quiet reflection on the meaning of the season.

In his major work on *The Birth of the Messiah*, Father Raymond Brown speaks about how the early preaching on Jesus emphasized his death and resurrection. The first gospel, Mark, did not even have a story of Jesus’ birth, and that did not seem to matter. What was significant was the baptism of Jesus and the teachings by Jesus, leading up to his crucifixion and eventual resurrection.

Yet birth stories help to make complete the story of a person’s life. But even here, the stories of Jesus’ birth, once recorded and shared, incorporated the ordinary as well as the extraordinary – a manger, a pre-birth trek, animals, shepherds, angels, a worried mother, a concerned father, wise ones and a star. Like the essence of Jesus’ teachings and the power of his death and resurrection, we move to a birth that allows us to see anew the spirit that guides his life – and ours – in simple ways, and in profound ways.

And so the story of Jesus’ birth is what we now hold onto in this season of Advent and Christmas.

Laurens van der Post tells of the Kalahari Bushmen the following tale: “The extreme expression of his spirit was in his stories. He was a wonderful story teller. The story was his most sacred possession. These people knew what we did not: that without a story you have not got a nation, or a culture, or a civilization. Without a story of your own to live you haven’t got a life of your own.”

Stories are important, and so the story of the birth of Jesus is important.

Birth stories recorded in the gospels were shared to make sure that we saw Jesus’ place in the world’s history, and the experience that people had of his life were significant. He surmounted challenges and a modest beginning to change the world. If Jesus’ story is to become our story, then we, too, can make a difference even if we have not been born in a palace or endowed with great wealth or gifts of magical skill. Where we came from is good

enough for God, since where Jesus came from in birth and in his entire life was also clearly good enough for God.

Today we celebrate communion, and it often has been a sacrament that put pressure on us to live up to God's standards. I always am ambivalent around communion, for I remember my intimidation at the very thought of taking communion as a youth and teenager. I delayed joining the church in part because I was not expected to take communion as a non-member back in the 1960's. I told my minister of my hesitation, and he said: "I have a feeling, Bill, that you will never feel good enough to take communion. That is okay, as long as you realize that communion is God's affirmation of you – God sees you as good enough, and that is all that matters."

Christmas is a message that who we are is good enough for God. And, after all, if you are good enough, and I am good enough, than anyone must be seen as good enough in God's eyes.

Let me share the tale that Elie Wiesel, the renowned Jewish writer, shared in his book *The Gates of the Forest*. When the great Rabbi Israel Bel Shem Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when his disciple had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer," and again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, another generation of rabbis arose, and in order to save the people once more, one of them would go into the forest and say: "I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place, and this must be sufficient." It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished.

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: "I am unable to light the fire, and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is tell the story, and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

Isak Dinesan wrote that "All sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them..."

Sam Keen, in his book *To a Dancing God*, suggests that the main shift in modern thinking is that we focus on the cause of things, but not necessarily the reason for things – we look for how events unfold and what causes them to happen, but we do not see the underlying meaning and insight that an event may present upon our lives.

The story of Jesus' birth is a story that is more concerned with the reason behind it and meaning that it communicates than it is solely worried about causation and activity.

So how the family ended up without a room is not the story; the fact that the Messiah was born in a stable is significant to speak of humility and modest means; the fact that a single mother gave birth and how it happened is not significant; at least it is not as significant as the fact that someone without status or power in society could be chosen by God to give

birth to the Messiah. Such a reality reminds us all that we carry within us hallowed opportunities that we overlook or dismiss at our own peril.

The fact that the holy family were displaced and removed from their homeland and how that happened pales in relationship to the meaning of that experience, namely that God can be found even in situations where we are homeless, lost, even refugees, and so discouraged.

Yes, the birth story of Jesus was not circulated until well after his birth, but it is a very important story that tells us much about what God cherishes, and what we as humans should seek in life.

We have reached the time for that birth story. We are on the cusp of Christmas Day, and the fulfillment of promises of old. We have surprised ourselves, maybe, that it is the day before Christmas.

We have at most 6 hours left to buy that special gift or needed present for a friend or loved one; we have the rest of our lives to be a gift to others in the example of Jesus the Christ child.

Come and enjoy a spiritual holiday together this season.