

Luke 2:1-20**“Our Faith in One Word”****December 20, 2015****The Rev. Dr. Robert S. Rayburn**

We will depart this morning and next from our current series of sermons on the Book of Acts to consider themes appropriate to the Advent Season: today a sermon on the Lord’s *first coming*, next Lord’s Day, God willing, a sermon on his *second coming*.

Text Comment

- v.3 It is a point of the greatest conceivable importance that the narrative of the birth of Jesus is rooted in history as it is: during the reign of Augustus and while Quirinius was governor of Syria. This will continue throughout the gospels and, indeed, to the end of the New Testament. These wonderful things happened *in those days, under those governments*. In the same way, Jesus died during the reign of Tiberius, during the governorship of Pontius Pilate, while Caiaphas was high priest. These are all people about whom we know a good deal from other sources. Whatever others may think or say, this is not mythology in *any* accepted sense of the word. The authors of the Gospels were writing what we call *history*. Christ’s birth was a real event in the real world in the same way that *taxes* are real, and we all know how real taxes are! Into the everyday world of that time, into its politics and into its social currents, came suddenly and unexpectedly this stupendous interruption.

Luke is the New Testament writer who always had an eye for what else was happening in the world of that time and who had a special interest in those moments when the history of Jesus and his apostles intersected with major figures or events of the world of his day. What is more, though there are certainly significant gaps in our knowledge of the history of that time and place, Luke’s accuracy as a historian has been confirmed time and time again, even down to small details of geography, the chronology of Greco-Roman political history, political nomenclature, or a first-hand knowledge of local conditions. He tells us himself he relied on eyewitnesses to ensure the accuracy of his narrative.

- v. 4 'Bethlehem.' Luke never actually says in this passage that any OT prophecy is here being fulfilled. But, just as Malachi 3 and 4 lay behind Gabriel's message to Zechariah and Isaiah 7 lay behind his message to Mary, without Luke actually saying so in either case, so Micah 5:2-5 lies unmistakably behind the history he is reporting here, and the point is all the more powerful for his understatement of that fact.

Events conspire to ensure that the birth will occur in Bethlehem – even a pagan emperor's need for revenue is made to contribute to the unfolding of God's plan for the salvation of the world – and, in Bethlehem, a mother gives birth to a prince of ancient lineage who will shepherd the scattered flock of Israel and extend his authority to the ends of the earth, proclaiming peace! That pretty well wraps up Micah's prediction!

- v.5 The chaste way in which the situation is described is designed to call our attention once again to what we were told in chapter 1 of the Lord's miraculous conception, that it was without the aid of a human father.
- v.7 You notice that Luke does not tell us precisely where Jesus was born. He only tells us what Mary did with her baby *after* he was born. But everyone knows what is being described here because we have seen it depicted in manger scenes and Christmas pageants a thousand times. Jesus was born in a stable or a barn, the structures we are used to seeing on farms and ranches. I'd always assumed that myself. However, it is doubtfully true, as recent scholarship, led by men who have lived in the Middle East and know its culture intimately, has shown. Previous scholarship, most of it Western of course, tended to read the text according to the conventions of Western, not middle eastern life. What this statement almost certainly means is that Jesus was born in a private home. In those days most people – apart from the really wealthy – and there would probably be none of them in Bethlehem, a small, rather insignificant hamlet – lived in the same structure as did their animals, at least at night. Either they lived on the top floor with the animals on the ground floor or together with them on the single floor of the house, a floor that had a somewhat raised level for the family and a lower level for the cow, the donkey, and a few sheep. In either case, the manger was *in the house*. A middle-eastern farmer today would read this narrative and assume that Jesus was born in a private home. There would have been few if any separate structures for animals in a poor village like Bethlehem. [Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, xv-xvi] We have tended historically to condemn the citizens of Bethlehem for failing to provide hospitality to Joseph and his very pregnant wife, but there is no great likelihood that there was any failure of hospitality, something almost unheard of in any case in middle-eastern culture.

Many of the other traditional features of the nativity story are likewise not present in the biblical narrative: that Jesus was born at night; that the birth occurred virtually upon their arrival in Bethlehem (v. 6 suggests the opposite), and that they tried to find accommodation but were refused for lack of space.

Indeed, the translation “inn” has also recently been challenged by scholars more familiar with ANE practice and vocabulary. The ordinary word for “inn” or “hostel” does not appear here and the word translated “inn” is used elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke to refer to the room of a house (Luke 22:10-12), indeed it is used to refer to the room where Jesus and his disciples shared the Last Supper. That room was presumably a guest room of someone's home and yet it is referred to with the term that is used here and translated “inn” as if there were no available room in the local hostel. So the meaning may well be that the guest room of the home in which Joseph and Mary stayed was already taken when they arrived. They were squeezed into the space that was left, perhaps with the animals in the other part of the house.

If Jesus were born in a private home it is also likely that Mary had a good deal of help in the childbirth, the women of the house or the women guests also there. Perhaps the village midwife was also called. Not the scene we are used to but very likely what actually happened. It has been pointed out that had the shepherds found the Christ child

in a barn they would immediately have done something about that, taken them to their homes or whatever. But he was in a home surrounded by caring people.

You'll notice that Luke gives us absolutely not a hint of the time of year, much less the date of the Lord's birth. Despite the best efforts of scholars ancient and modern, no one knows when Jesus was born. One scholar writes that it was probably a combination of two factors that brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem at that time: 1) the requirements of the tax registration gave them the opportunity and 2) the gossiping tongues of Nazareth probably hurried them on their way. [Morris, 101]

- v.10 The verb translated "bring good news" is our "evangelize." It was to become the characteristic way of speaking about or communicating the message of Christ and his salvation: "bring good news."
- v.19 If you wonder why Luke makes that remark about Mary and says nothing about what Joseph thought, the answer is probably that he talked to Mary, but Joseph was dead by the time he was able to interrogate the people who were eyewitnesses of these events.

I'm not precisely sure how many times I have preached the text we have just read, but it is a considerable number, perhaps upwards of twenty times over the past almost 38 years. No wonder. It is one of the most beautiful passages in the Bible and no other narrative provides an account of the circumstances of the Lord's birth. Matthew mentions the birth of Jesus, but gives no details. It is here in Luke that we learn of the holy family's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, of their baby being laid in a manger, and of the angelic announcement to the shepherds. This text is the source of most of our Christmas hymns and carols and no celebration of Christmas would be complete without the reading of it. Rich and multi-layered as this text is, in all of those sermons that I have preached on this account of the birth of Christ, I have never concentrated on the particular phrase in v. 11 that is our subject this morning.

Luke 2 is manifestly a *narrative*, an account of things that happened. One can, of course, believe that the events herein described never happened, but one cannot deny that Luke, in his narrative, intends to describe what *actually* happened when Jesus was born. Richard Dawkins, the Oxford professor and outspoken atheist, writes:

"The virgin birth, the Resurrection, the raising of Lazarus, even the Old Testament miracles, all are freely used for religious propaganda, and they are very effective with an audience of unsophisticates and children." [From his "Snake Oil and Holy Water," *Forbes Magazine* (Nov. 19, 1999), cited in Strobel, *The Case for Faith*, 57, 281]

Ouch! There is nothing new in Dawkins' opinion. The same things were said about the Christian message by Greco-Roman critics in its earliest days. Still, we are grateful in a way for people like Richard Dawkins. They put the point plainly. Dawkins' passion for his atheism trumps his good manners and he doesn't mind resorting to name-calling. In that sense, Dawkins is a very unmodern man, and the better for it in our view. He cares about things being true or false. Many in our time do not, scholars included. But Dawkins thinks it is important to separate fact from fiction, to expose error, and to face facts. He is exactly right. No one is more eager for facts to be faced than

Christians themselves. There is a lot of nonsense that passes for religious faith even in the Christian world. We are the first to admit it. It's embarrassing to us, as it ought to be. What is more, we are quite ready to admit, indeed we insist that others admit that if the events reported here did *not* happen, then Christianity *is* nothing but propaganda. It may be more helpful and more life-affirming propaganda than Richard Dawkins' propaganda – and his atheism with a human face is certainly propaganda – but it is propaganda nonetheless, stories or rumors spread to justify or buttress a set of cherished beliefs. We'd much rather people face the Bible's hard-edged claims of truth – absolute and unqualified truth that is truth for everyone and for all time – than dismiss the entire matter with platitudes about the sublime moral teaching of Jesus or with postmodern tripe about the truth being whatever makes anybody happy. He either was or was not born of a virgin. Angels either announced or did not announce his birth. If he wasn't and if they didn't then we will be the first to shout from the housetops that Christianity is untrue, its good news is not in fact news at all, good or bad. Our faith, like it or not, is fundamentally and necessarily the claim that certain events *happened* in the world during the reigns of Augustus and Tiberius, when first Quirinius and then Pontius Pilate were governors of that part of the world.

But, to the perpetual amazement of Richard Dawkins and others like him, there have been a great many people, even learned people, sophisticated people, even the sort of people who have no patience with inventions masquerading as facts, even Oxford professors like Richard Dawkins, even professional scientists with impeccable credentials, who have considered Luke's narrative, his credentials as a serious historian, his care to get his facts right, his concern for telling the truth, and come firmly to the conclusion that what we have before us in Luke 2:1-20 is a faithful record of actual events, unusual, spectacular, and unprecedented as they were. Early Christians knew very well how preposterous this sounded to the sophisticated people of their world. But there were a great many who were eyewitnesses of this history and they knew it to be true, however contrary to the expectations and the prejudices of their time.

But Richard Dawkins is right about another thing. This history carries a message. He dismisses it as propaganda, a term that usually nowadays carries a negative connotation, suggesting that it is a *false* message, untrue, even dangerous. We are, however, sure it is true and we find its message to be something very different from propaganda in the usual sense of the term. *But it is very definitely a message!* In the Bible history itself, and especially the history of salvation, of the great turning points in God's plan for the salvation of the world reveals the same theology, if you will, the same soteriology – that is, the same teaching about salvation as do the expositions of salvation that we find, say, in the letters of the Apostle Paul later in the New Testament. All through the Bible we see this. Eternal truth is stamped on the face of history and especially on that history in which the Lord God actually fulfills his plans for mankind either for salvation or for judgment. In this sense, the history of God's dealings with mankind is not merely a subject of divine revelation, something taught in the Bible, it *was* revelation at the time it happened and it *continues to be* revelation to us in the record or narrative of those events it as we read it in the Bible. *And in Luke 2:11 that revelation, that message, is encapsulated in a word!*

What the angel announced, as we read in v. 11, was that the baby who had been born in Bethlehem was none less than Christ *the Lord*. Now the terms the angel used were familiar to the shepherds. The angel wanted them to understand what was being said to them and so the message was put in terms they would understand. They were Jews; they were steeped in the Word of God, the Law and

the Prophets. And in those books, as they had heard them read in the synagogue, and on other occasions, they had learned of the coming of the Messiah. From their childhood they had known that God had promised to send a deliverer to restore the fortunes of his people. Jews had been looking for the coming of the Messiah for centuries by this time. Every Jew thought about the Messiah, wondered when he would come, and what would happen when he did. “Christ,” as you know, is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word “Messiah.” That is, it means in Greek what Messiah means in Hebrew. The verb from which *Christ*, is derived, as is true of the verb from which the Hebrew noun, *Messiah*, is derived, means “to pour,” as in pouring oil over the head of the man to anoint him king. The Messiah or the Christ is, in other words, the one whom God has anointed or appointed to be Israel’s King. Christ means, as “Messiah” meant, “Anointed One,” which in the context of biblical prophecy means “*the* anointed one,” the long-promised Messiah.

So far so good. But then the angel says that the Christ, the Messiah, *is the Lord!* The Greek word *kurios* has a variety of meanings. It can refer to an owner of a property, such as a vineyard, or the master of slaves. In fact it can refer to anyone who occupies a high position in reference to others. But it is also the term regularly used to refer to God. In fact, *kurios* is the term most often used in the LXX, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible executed some two hundred years before Christ, to translate Yahweh. Yahweh is the personal name for God. William, Robert, and John, are personal names. Yahweh, the one who is, is the personal name for God. So, Yahweh being the personal name for God, *kurios* is not actually a translation or a transliteration but a substitution. As you know, the Jews were superstitious about pronouncing the divine name and substituted the Hebrew word “Lord,” whenever the name Yahweh appeared in the text. The LXX translators were Jews and did the same in their Greek translation and for some reason, never satisfactorily explained to me, Christian translators have done the same ever since. When you come across “Lord” in your reading of the OT, wherever the term refers to God, as it usually does, the Hebrew text reads “Yahweh.”

Now what is significant for our purposes this morning is that the use of “Lord” here in 2:11 is clearly as a reference to the divine name. “Christ, the Lord” could not really mean anything else but “the Christ who is Yahweh.” In other words, the angel was saying – whether or not the shepherds grasped this in the moment or not and I suspect they did not – that the Messiah was God himself, that the baby lying in the manger was Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God who had revealed himself to Moses at the burning bush, the God who was the creator of heaven and earth!

The larger context confirms this. In Zechariah’s song, the *Benedictus* in chapter 1, which the old man wrote, we read because he was filled with the Holy Spirit, Zechariah prophesies of his infant son, who would grow up to be John the Baptist,

“You, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before *the Lord* to prepare his ways.” [1:76]

In that verse “the Most High” and “the Lord” are in parallel and the statement could only mean that, as Malachi had prophesied centuries before, the coming of the Messiah would be the coming of Yahweh himself. “Christ *the Lord*” in v. 11 identifies the baby boy in the most exalted

terms possible. The angel, of course, knew exactly *who and what* Jesus was and so for him to identify the child as *the Lord* was tremendously significant.

This is all the more interesting because as the Gospels go on to make clear, no one was expecting – even real believers – *that the Messiah would be God himself*. They did not as yet have a doctrine of the tri-unity of the living God; that awaited the incarnation itself for its revelation and so they were unprepared for the idea of an incarnation, of God sending himself as it were to Israel. And then, of course, they were utterly unprepared for the idea of the living God being a little baby. It was a mystery they could not really have been expected to grasp. Now, to be sure, there were certainly intimations of the divine identity of the coming Messiah in the prophecies of the Messiah in the Old Testament, especially Isaiah 9 and Malachi 5, but the idea was so far beyond their imagination, that it simply did not register. But here, at the birth of Jesus, the angel made a point of saying that the baby boy was both the Messiah and the Lord himself.

Now don't let your familiarity with Christ's identity as God the Son now become man diminish the stupendous declaration of the angel! The Lord had come into the world as a baby boy. *This is the Christian declaration, the foundation of our faith and of the message we proclaim to the world*. The Son of God became a man so that men might become the sons of God. It is not hard at all to identify fabulously important implications of that single fact.

1. Our salvation requires the greatest conceivable things to be done on our behalf. Most people don't think that. Most of the people you rub shoulders with everyday have never thought that. If they have any concept of salvation or reconciliation with God or life after death, it is something ordinary, predictable, and relatively undemanding. Do this or that often enough, don't be an ax murderer, and it should suffice. The idea that nothing less than the incarnation of God and his suffering ignominy and death at the hands of his own creatures is utterly foreign to them. They don't imagine that their situation is hopeless apart from the intervention of God himself in such a magnificent and tragic way. They don't see themselves as exposed to God's judicial wrath because of their sin and rebellion. Whatever their religion or philosophy of life, and no matter if many of them call themselves Christians, if they have any hope of something after death, it rests on an entirely ordinary calculation of effort and reward, not much effort, in fact, and a reward so vague, so uninteresting, that their hearts never beat faster in anticipation. They don't see that theirs is a problem so serious, so fatal that such an extraordinary thing should have been required to save them.

Every other faith, every other philosophy enables you to grab the brass ring somehow, someway by your own effort. Your commitment, your effort, your obedience – in whatever way it is required in that religion or that philosophy – tells the tale. There is no great event in history upon which your hope of salvation turns. There is no dramatic interruption of the ordinary round of human life that makes possible what otherwise would be completely impossible. Nothing makes more plain that our faith as Christians is not a naturalistic faith. It does not trade in things that any man can know and that any person can do. Herein lies the difference that separates Christianity from all other faiths, all other religions, all other philosophies of human life. It is an account of things that have happened in the world that human beings could not and did not make happen.

2. *The nature of salvation itself is a divine work and a divine gift.* In almost all thinking about salvation – whatever a human being thinks salvation to be in this life or the life to come – it is accomplished by the ascent of man, not the descent of God. Whether we are speaking of the great religions of the world – Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism – or the secular philosophies popular in our time, even the atheistic ones – the ones that come and go and have always come and gone (believe me the ones that are popular today won't be popular fifty years from now) – I say, whatever is required to be done man must do and man can do. Only in the Bible, *only in the Bible*, are we taught that only God himself could rescue us and only by doing the greatest conceivable things, things so immense in their conception that we ourselves cannot even grasp them, and only by suffering the greatest conceivable pain on our behalf. Think of this history. See how little any of these people *do!* The baby was conceived in Mary's womb by the divine power of the Holy Spirit. She did nothing. Joseph goes to Bethlehem because he has to. *It wasn't his idea.* The shepherds are simply tending their flocks. They didn't pray to be visited by angels, it was a complete surprise. *God is at work here;* we are but the witnesses and the beneficiaries of what he is doing.

This is why “love” and “grace” are so fundamental to the entire Christian system and message. There is no mighty love of God reaching down to man in the other great religions; there are no “unsearchable riches of Christ,” in the other faiths and philosophies of mankind, and there is certainly no suffering God, no self-sacrificing God, no God willing to undergo indescribable humiliation and suffering at the hands of his own creatures if only he might deliver them from sin, judgment, and eternal death. There is no reason to say in the other faiths or philosophies of man what Mary says in her *Magnificat*: “the Mighty One has done great things for me!”

3. *Salvation is a deeply personal matter, not some systematic calculation of merit and desert.* It is personal on God's side – “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son for it” – and it is personal on our side – everywhere our embrace of this salvation is a matter of trust in Christ, of love for him, and of gratitude so great that it has the power to transform our lives, to eradicate our selfishness and make us into lovers of God and of our neighbors.

This explains so much of what we read in the Bible about salvation and the Christian life. It is so much a matter of fear, of sorrow, of the broken-heart, of longing and then all of that replaced by joy and peace and the fulfillment of life. Calculations of merit and desert are invariably joyless. When you receive your paycheck do you clutch it to your breast, do your tears begin to well up, do you have trouble being able to read the numbers on the stub because of your emotion? Of course not. You know it's coming, it always comes, you deserve it, indeed, the company *must* give it to you. There is no love or grace in it. But salvation is not like that at all!

The Bible is always talking about and describing the joy of God's salvation. Where does that joy come from? It comes from a great love, a great sacrifice, a mighty salvation that opens up for us a way for us the way to a life of perfect happiness, peace, and love. We love because he first loved us. We rejoice because God loved us and gave himself for us that we might be with him forever. We live with a deep and abiding peace, even in this world of struggle and death, because we know that if God is for us, who can be against us!

Christians are like Joseph, somewhat clueless witnesses to extraordinary things that are done for them and given to them. Christians are like Mary who find created within them an eternal life they had nothing to do with bringing into existence. John, in the first chapter of his Gospel, makes a point of saying that what happened to Mary is like what happens to every believer. He or she is born into eternal life by a secret and supernatural work of divine power within him or her. Christians are also like the shepherds, flabbergasted to learn of extraordinary things they never imagined, but delighted beyond words to discover that they are all true, just as they were told.

The English novelist and playwright, Dorothy Sayers, wrote of the birth of Christ:

“From the beginning of time until now, this is the only thing that has ever really happened. When you understand this you will understand all mysteries, and all history.”
[*The Man Born to be King*]

How right she was!