

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 24, 2017

A Stable Center

Luke 2:1-20

Tis the season for rearranging the sanctuary furniture. Though your pews haven't budged, the last two morning worship services did involve moving some of the other big items. That's because our church, like many other congregations, basically turns this part of our sanctuary into a stage. Say farewell to the communion table and say hello to Bethlehem's cut-rate hotel. Out with the pulpit and in with the local stable. Exit the fancy chairs and enter bales of hay where weary shepherds can take a load off. This entire space gets creatively converted into a set where boys and girls can retell the story of the Savior's arrival.

I think of a scene in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Having done his best to organize and put on a neighborhood Christmas play, Charlie Brown ends up mocked by his peers, especially over his pitiful looking tree. Frustrated and dejected, Charlie cries out, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" That's when Linus, after taking his thumb out of his mouth, steps to center stage, blanket in tow, and asks for the lights to be turned down. As the camera zooms in on the spotlighted Linus, he begins reciting Luke's story of Jesus' birth. "And there were in the same country shepherds, abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. . . (2:8). After concluding with, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men" (v. 14), Linus goes back over to Charlie Brown and says, "That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown." Then he sticks his thumb back in his mouth and starts sucking again. It's one of those moments when all the complexity, chaos, and confusion of the season move out to the edge and a lone beam of light recenters us on how God has come to save us.

Above me is a single light shining down on the pulpit. It probably gives me enough illumination to do what I need to do tonight. But, unlike Linus, I'm not going to ask that the sanctuary lights be turned down. I fear that dimming them can encourage drowsiness, especially if you've come here in a weary state tonight.

The story that Linus told is the same one you heard Tom read a few minutes ago. It begins with the news that there will be no tax cut for the residents of the Roman Empire. The emperor has announced that a census will be taken for purposes of assessment and taxation. For Joseph and Mary, this comes as both bad news and good news. The bad news is that there will be no reductions in rates. The good news is that with Jesus being their firstborn, Joseph and Mary will be able to take advantage of the child tax credit when they file their Form 1040 next year.

For now, though, in order to register their property, Joseph and Mary need to make the trip to Bethlehem, where Joseph has his family roots. While they're there, doing what the Roman government has ordered them to do, the plan for the arrival of God's government, God's reign, continues to unfold. Caesar may be focused on tax deadlines, but the Lord is focused on a more important due date. The time has come for the world's true Ruler and Savior to be born. Now the question is, exactly where will Mary deliver the baby? In a

small village temporarily filled with out-of-towners, options are limited. Luke says very simply and briefly, "She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (v. 7).

Luke probably doesn't mean "inn" in the sense of a local motel with an innkeeper. The word often translated here as "inn" is used later in Luke's Gospel to refer to the guest room where Jesus and his disciples shared the Passover meal. This type of guest room, attached to a private home, is probably what Luke has in mind in the story of Jesus' birth as well. If so, Joseph and Mary may very well have been relying on the hospitality of family or friends whose guest room was full. So they may have given Joseph and Mary space in the family room with everyone else, including some animals, or under a covered shelter near the lodging. Whatever the specifics, we read Luke wrongly if we think that Joseph and Mary were just kicked out into the cold, alone and friendless, wandering the streets, with nowhere to go. More than likely, their family helped make sure that they were provided for, one way or another.

One of the prominent features in the opening chapters of Luke's Gospel is his emphasis on the role of family in the coming of our Savior. And coupled with that, the significance of religious rituals and traditions. Though the reality of the Roman Empire shapes and affects a lot of what's happening at the time of Jesus' birth, it doesn't change the fact that Jesus is born into a devoted Jewish family. We see this even more sharply in the scene immediately following the story of Jesus' birth. Luke takes us quickly from the fields where shepherds are spreading the good news to the Temple where Joseph and Mary are participating in a service dedicating their infant son to the Lord. This is just one of several moments in the first two chapters of Luke where family and faith come to the fore in God's unfolding purposes.

True, as the story goes forward and Jesus carries out his public ministry, he makes many radical and provocative statements about how even family allegiances mustn't stand in the way of one's loyalty to the kingdom of God. But this doesn't mean that family love and loyalties are unimportant. Remember that as soon as Mary gets a visit from Gabriel and accepts her role as the mother of the Son of God, she rushes off to visit Elizabeth, her relative. When the emperor orders everyone back to their hometowns for the census, Joseph and Mary, like so many others, are linked once again with their families. As I've already noted, Jesus is born in space that may very well have been provided by family or friends. Then his parents go to the Temple to present him to the Lord. This was a way of acknowledging and affirming that this child belongs to God and to the community of God's people. He's embraced as part of the family of God. Taken together, these pieces of the narrative show us that Luke can't tell the story of Jesus without telling the story of Jesus' family.

Your family has its own story, a story that's still unfolding as we celebrate another Christmas. Some parts of that story are uplifting, beautiful, and reassuring. Other parts of that story are discouraging, ugly, and troubling. Like most families, your own family's story is probably a mixture of both great promise and persistent problems. And this time of the year has a way of magnifying the best and the worst of family life. On the one hand, we reunite with loved ones and get a fresh sense of how much family support and cohesion actually mean. On the other hand, we may have to face again some old wounds, painful memories, and broken dreams. The holiday season has a way of reminding us that our stories don't always work out as cleanly and smoothly and happily as the closing scene of a Hallmark Christmas movie. And yet, even with all their brokenness and imperfections, our families can still provide us with a kind of stability and centeredness that's critical to living a life of loving God and loving others.

Gordon MacDonald tells a story about a woman who approached him following a lecture he had just given. Though she was from Nigeria, she introduced herself using an American name. "What's your African name?" MacDonald asked. It was several syllables long with a musical sound to it. "What does it mean?" he continued. She answered, "It means 'Child who takes the anger away.'" When MacDonald inquired as to why she was given that name, she said,

My parents had been forbidden by their parents to marry. But they loved each other so much that they defied the family opinions and married anyway. For several years they were ostracized from both their families. Then my mother became pregnant with me. And when the grandparents held me in their arms for the first time, the walls of hostility came down. I became the one who swept the anger away. And that's the name my mother and father gave me.

As MacDonald points out, that would be a suitable name for Jesus as well.¹ Child who takes the anger away and creates peace. In and through Jesus, God is at work bringing reconciliation, healing, and restoration. And how much we pursue that kind of peace, and practice that kind of peace, in every aspect of our lives, including our families, reveals how much Christ is at the center of our existence, during the holidays and year round.

In fact, Christmas reminds us that Jesus is the one stable center in a divided and disrupted world. Jesus himself arrived in a world full of political alliances, taxation policies, ethnic conflict, economic inequality, and religious divisions. A world where Rome's promises of peace were often unfulfilled. But notice that though the story of Jesus' birth in chapter two begins with Rome in control, the Gospel of Luke actually begins in the Temple, the center of Jewish life and the center of the universe. The place of God's presence and sign of God's sovereignty. That's where Gabriel first shows up to tell Zechariah that he will have a son, setting the rest of Luke's story in motion. And by the end of tonight's text, when the shepherds have returned to their fields, we've come to see that now God is present, dwelling with us, through this child resting in a manger.

This child sleeping in the feeding trough is the one reality on which we can depend. Lloyd Douglas says that when he was a college student he lived in a boarding house. Downstairs on the first floor was an elderly man, a retired music teacher who was now infirm and unable to leave the apartment. He and Douglas had a ritual they would go through together every morning. Douglas would come down the steps, open the old man's door, and ask, "Well, what's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of his wheelchair, and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat, the piano across the hall is out of tune, but my friend, that is middle C!"²

Like that middle C, Jesus is the one constant reality on which to rest our lives. Tonight, we give thanks for all those gifts that provide us with stability and centeredness in a divided and disrupted world. Gifts like family, friends, heritage, rituals, traditions, and especially the life of the church. My desire is that this congregation of God's people will be a faithful embodiment of Jesus, a stable center for you in the uncertainties and changing circumstances of your life in a world that's still the object of God's steadfast love.

¹ Gordon MacDonald, *Leadership Weekly* (November 6, 2002).

² From *Illustrations for Preaching and Teaching: From Leadership Journal*, ed. Craig Brian Larson (Grand rapids: Baker, 1993) 27.