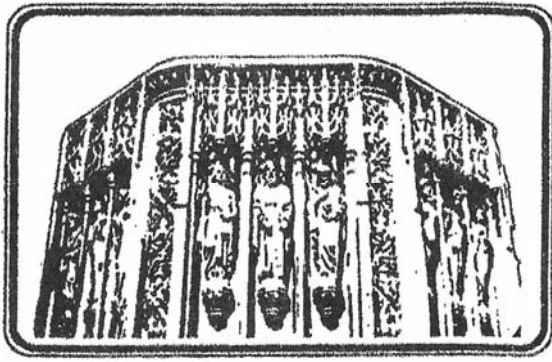


December 25, 2011



Sunday Sermon
from
Church of the Saviour
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118

December 25, 2011

“Messengers in the Manger”

Isaiah 52:7-10

Dianne Tobey Covault, Associate Pastor

Who woke you up this morning and wished you a Merry Christmas? Was it one of your children, either a young one who couldn't wait to see what was under the tree, or an older one who brought you a greeting by phone? Was it your spouse or partner, or maybe a friend? Or maybe you just heard it for the first time as you walked in the door today. I hope each of you has heard these words by now. Christ is Born! Praise God! Merry Christmas!

When my sister Joanne and I were growing up in the 1970s, the one thing she most wanted and asked for every Christmas was a horse. Now, a horse is not a small gift, and although she eventually did get a horse of her own, a horse wasn't something Santa could really bring down the chimney. But that didn't stop her from putting “horse” at the top of her Christmas list every year.

Joanne is two years older than I, and in most of the family movies from when I was between 2 and 7 and she was between 4 and 9, I am watching every move she makes. I really wanted to be just like her, and I wanted her to get what she wanted for Christmas. In fact, I still do want her to get what she wants, and usually, it still has something to do with horses.

One year in particular stands out in my memory. We must have been about 4 and 6 years old. At about 3 in the morning, I woke up and couldn't get back to sleep. Finally, I just had to sneak out and see what Santa left under the tree. I couldn't wait any longer. I tiptoed down the hall to our living room and saw them – two horses! Well, that was it. I ran back into my sister's room and shook her awake. “Jo, Jo, we got horses for Christmas! We got horses for Christmas!” I was so excited to bring my sister the message of good news – Santa had come, and given her what she asked for! She was immediately awake and ran down the hall – to see the two toy plastic pogo ponies standing by the tree.

Thankfully, I don't remember her being TOO upset with me as the messenger bearing the message. And to my four year old eyes, those pogo ponies, with their big spring hooves that allowed us to bounce down the driveway, were pretty cool presents. But I don't think I tried to wake my sister up with that particular message any longer.

Today's scripture lesson is not the gospel story of Jesus' birth, which I hope many of you heard last night. The baby has been born! Instead, I chose for our reading the Hebrew scripture lesson assigned for Christmas Day, which is from the prophet Isaiah. “How beautiful upon the mountains” Isaiah tells us “are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.”

The picture Isaiah paints for us is one of a walled city, with sentinels who are keeping watch from the ramparts. But at the time Isaiah was writing, the city of Jerusalem had been destroyed by the invading Babylonian army. The sentinels were standing watch on walls that

were crumbled and destroyed. Many of those who would have been watching from the city had been exiled some 600 miles to the northeast, to Babylon, by the river Ur.

And yet, they watched, and waited, in hope. They waited in hope despite the fact that previous messengers had brought anything but good news. Previous messengers had told the people of the coming invasion by the Assyrians, of the first visit of the Babylonians, and of the news that Jerusalem had fallen.¹

Isaiah announces to them, “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace”

Beautiful feet? How can a messenger have beautiful feet? Messengers traveled for miles and miles, running as quickly as they could, over rough and dusty terrain. Our modern day equivalent might be that of a long distance runner. I don’t know if you have ever looked at the feet of a long distance runner, or if you are a long distance runner, but the feet of a runner are anything but beautiful. Callouses and blisters are common, and even a wonderful phenomenon called black toenail...well, I won’t say more about that. Just that you don’t see me in sandals very often!

But the prophet sees a messenger with feet that are beautiful, for they are bringing good news.

Who was the messenger who brought you the news of Jesus Christ in a way that it became more than just a story, more than just a reason to put up a pretty tree and hang some stockings by your fireplace? Who helped you see Jesus as real? Was it a messenger with beautiful feet, or feet that were made beautiful by the message?

I don’t remember many of my Sunday school teachers from when I was young. But I do remember knowing, from when I was very small, that something special happened every time I came into my church. From Christmas Eve services that were literally magical, since our pastor was also a magician and ventriloquist, to folks that welcomed me and made me feel special every time I walked in the door, church became the “place to be.”

In my sophomore year in high school, my friend from school, Jennifer, invited me to come to Sunday evening youth group. I had never been before. I had no idea what really happened at youth group. But I went, mostly out of boredom.

Jennifer’s invitation turned me on to one of the most powerful spiritual groups I have ever been a part of – she was the messenger that brought the message. A message that turned into a spiritual awakening and an ever deepening faith in God. A message, that, really, led me to know that I had a call to pastoral ministry. And it all started with a simple invitation to an evening of ultimate Frisbee, singing They’ll Know We Are Christians, and planning for an upcoming retreat.

I invited you to bring with you today a messenger from your manger – a shepherd, or an angel, or a wise man, or even a sheep. If you’ve had a nativity scene set up in your house, like we have, for the past few weeks, all of these messengers have been heading in one direction, right? Toward the barn, toward the trough filled with hay, toward the baby. Some of you might have started your Advent with the camels, and the sheep, and the shepherds and wise men far away from the crèche, moving closer each day. Or maybe you didn’t put the baby Jesus in the manger until last night after you came home from worship, or early this morning on the day we celebrate the birth.

¹ Beth Laneel Tanner “Exegetical Perspective on Isaiah 52:7-10” in *Feasting on the Word Year B, Volume 1*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors (Louisville, KY, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008).

And so we all come, to gaze at the baby in the manger, to gaze in wonder at this gift that God has given us – a gift more precious than any other. The gift of God’s presence – God-with us – Emmanuel. God – the incredible ruler of the universe – coming as a baby, dependent on others for food, for shelter, for love.

There is a part of us that could stay there, at the manger, forever. Kneeling before the baby who is Wonderful, Counselor, Almighty God, marveling at the gift. We could stay with our faces inward, toward that baby and that precious scene. We could just drink in the wonder of it. In fact, I hope you have, and I hope you do. Take some time to sit in God’s presence, either in a special spot in your own home, or even in the quiet of our sanctuary, and know the deep and abiding love of God in your soul.

The thing is, you can’t just stop there. Facing the manger for the rest of our lives isn’t what we have been called to do. Worshipping God isn’t just about our devotion here, singing hymns together, praising God together in our comfortable community of faith.

Worshipping God means getting up, and turning around, and going out from the manger to bring the message to the world.

How can you do that? You might wonder. How can I tell other people about Jesus? I can’t talk about God at work, I might get fired. I can’t talk about God at school, everyone will think I’m some sort of fanatic.

Living your faith, sharing your faith, doesn’t have to be flamboyant and in-the-face of your friends and coworkers. Living your faith can be as simple as shining a light into a dark corner – giving a listening ear or a ride to someone who needs one, telling someone you’ll pray for them – and doing it. Being a messenger might mean loving someone no one else sees fit to love – or someone no one else even sees.

How did you first hear God’s message of love in Jesus? Maybe it was as simple as an invitation to worship or youth group. Maybe it was your parents reading to you from the Bible or taking time to pray with you. I can remember my own dad walking with me on snowy mornings during an early Lent, walking to the church where we participated together in an early morning Bible study. His willingness to get up early before a long day of work to share with me stuck with me longer than the topic we studied. My dad spending time with me was as important a message of God’s love as the book that we read.

I look at all these beautiful pieces from your nativity scenes up here – from ceramic, to wood, to toddler-proof plastic. I look at them and I think of the ways they may have come into your home – from a friend or relative who gave you a gift when you were first married, or perhaps a treasured family heirloom that has been passed down from generation to generation, or maybe something you brought for your own children to cherish. These are your messengers – brought to you by ones who have shared the message with you, and now, a way for you to share the message with others.

When you go home today, I invite you to turn your messengers around – send the wise men and the shepherds, the sheep and the camels, out from the manger into the world. When someone asks you why they are facing away, tell them they can’t wait to share the message of Jesus with the world. And then, take time to share that message of love – that there is a God so big, that God can be in the heart of every person in the world. That there is a God who cares about us so much, he came to earth as a little baby. There is a God who cares about YOU so much, there is nothing more important to God than to be in relationship with you, to have you share the desires of your heart, and to rest in your heart, filling you with a love that is deeper than you could ever imagine.