

The Divine Reversal

Christmas Eve 2006

Sermon Background Study

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Alleluia!! Christ is born!!

I don't often get teary at movies and when I do, I can usually see it coming. (Yes, *The Notebook* got me.) When my family and I went to see *The Nativity Story* a few weeks ago, I wasn't sure what to expect. Given what I do for a living, I too often find myself picking apart a movie like that, looking for historical inaccuracies and sloppy theology. I hoped the movie would be well-done, but I was completely unprepared for my emotional reaction to it. I found myself overcome by the scene of Jesus' birth. I wasn't the only one. There weren't many people in the theater, but those who were there sat silently at the movie's end, unwilling or unable to move.

The idea that the creator of the cosmos would choose to, as Paul puts it, be “born in human likeness,” is one thing. But to be born in this way, lying in an animal feed trough, surrounded by a bunch of no-account shepherds and smelly beasts. My heart and mind reeled with the question - “What does this tell me about God . . . and about myself?”

Reading With Heart & Mind

We are wrapping up our journey of reading *Thru the Bible* in one year. Many St. Andrew members who never thought they could do it, will soon have read through the entire Bible. The question is now, “What's next?”

Much of my week is spent teaching and writing about the Bible. It is very easy for me read the Bible for information as I struggle to pull together the many classes and studies. I also often find myself treating the Bible as a tool that I can use to inspire me or fix a problem. What is hard is taking the time to read the Bible with my full heart and mind. I found that even the three or four chapters a day of the *Thru the Bible* reading plan was often too much for any meditative or thoughtful reading.

Beginning in January, I invite you to begin with me to learn the art of spiritual reading. For the next twelve months, we'll go through selected books of the Bible, reading only one story or key passage each day. My plan is to read the story twice during the day, once in the morning and once in the evening. It is my hope that I can learn how to keep the story with me throughout the day, living with it and letting it work within me.

The Bible is “the Word of God for the people of God.” Reading Scripture is not about using the Bible to try to pull God into the bits and pieces of my story. It is not about turning the Bible into a tool that I can use to fix me or my problems. Instead, it is about my entering the Bible so I can discover myself. It is about stepping into God's story and finding transformation.

The daily passages will be incorporated into the page three Bible readings that have always been part of these Sermon Background Studies. These studies are always in the bulletin and are posted on-line at www.standrewacademy.org.

I hope that you will prayerfully consider joining me as we strive to be ever-truer readers of Scripture and disciples of Jesus.

The unexpected

In order to make a full-length story of Jesus' birth from the accounts in Luke and Matthew, the writers of *The Nativity Story* had to use a good bit of imagination. Gratefully, their imaginations were well-informed, both scripturally and historically. For example, the movie does a good job of bringing out the messianic fervor of the times.

The Jews chafed under the oppression of the Romans and their puppet king, Herod. The people anxiously waited for the day when God would raise up his messiah, his anointed one, who would throw off Roman rule and cleanse the temple of all pagan influences. The Jews believed that this messiah would arrive in power and might and wonder and glory. The messiah would look like, well . . . a messiah, a king. At one point in the movie, Herod, fearing the rise of this messiah, instructs his soldiers to inspect all the men returning to Bethlehem for the Roman-ordered census, believing that they'd know the messiah when they see him.

But, of course, everyone was looking in the wrong direction. God's messenger comes to a very young unmarried woman, probably 13 or 14, who lives in the very insignificant village of Nazareth in Galilee. Here too, the movie strikes the right chord. When the angel, Gabriel, comes to Mary she is engaged to Joseph in an arranged marriage. Following the unusual Jewish customs of that day, when Joseph and Mary are engaged, they are considered legally married though they cannot live together nor share sexual intimacy for a year. Thus, when Mary's pregnancy begins to show it is taken to result from an act of adultery, giving Joseph every right to divorce her or even sanction her stoning.

A Very Public Christmas

Each year, *Christmas* seems to get pushed further and further out of the public square. I just read in London's Daily Mail that "only one in 100 Christmas cards sold in Britain contains any religious imagery or message." Why does the Daily Mail even bother referring to them as Christmas cards?

In the midst of this, it can be hard to remember that the angels' proclamation of "Good News of great joy" was good news for the whole world, not just for the shepherds and not just for the Jews. This Good News is not even good news only for the Christians. This was, and is, a public proclamation.

We are blessed to live in a country that protects religious freedom. But that diversity sometimes tempts us to turn Christianity into little more than a private spirituality, as if all that matters is our own individual relationship with Jesus.

Christmas reminds us that the birth of the baby Jesus to Mary signified that the time had come for God to keep the promise he had made long before, to renew *all* of his creation and to restore his relationship with *all* of humanity. So, my advice is that you extend a Merry Christmas to all and strive to let others see the light of Christmas in you each day.

This is how God is born? This village and this shamed couple are the places Herod should have been looking? It was unthinkable then and if we stop to think about, just as shocking now. The Christmas story is the great Divine Reversal. In is out. Up is down. Great is small. As Mary sings to her cousin Elizabeth when they are both pregnant, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:52-53). Unexpected yes, but Good News beyond our imagining.

Humble and approachable

It comes down to this. It is easy to know that God is great – just open a window and look around. The greatness of God comes easily to our minds and hearts. And it is easy to know that God is God and we're not. The history of humanity's many religions is the story of distant and powerful gods. Even the ancient Jews knew God as basically unapproachable, for only on a single day of the year could the high priest step into God's presence.¹

But to know that God is humble and approachable, that we could never know without the birth of the Christ child.² What sort of God makes himself known in this way, a helpless infant? It seems miracle enough that God would take on our weak, tear-filled humanity. But born to Mary and Joseph?

Yancey writes, "The God who created matter took shape within it, as an artist might become a spot on a painting or a playwright a character within his own play. God wrote a story, only using real characters, on the real pages of history. The Word become flesh." This is the Christmas gift.

¹The tearing of the temple curtain in the moments after Jesus' death on the cross (Mark 15:38) signifies that, in Christ, God is approachable as he had not been before.

²This insight was driven home to me by Philip Yancey. If someone were to ask me for a Christmas book, I'd press into their hands a copy of Yancey's, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, the story of his journey to discover the Jesus who really was and really is.

Thru the Bible Daily Bible Readings

December 24 ~ 30

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help.

Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Sunday Revelation 13-14; Isaiah 62 We meet Satan's two beasts. The three comprise an anti-Trinity. Yet, the great multitude of God's people worship the lamb.</p>	<p>Monday Revelation 15-16; Isaiah 63 After another worship scene, bowls of wrath are poured out on the earth. As you've probably gathered, Revelation is built upon repetitive cycles of dramatic images driving us to this question: will we choose God?</p>
<p>Tuesday Revelation 17-18; Isaiah 64 The story of the great whore and the fall of Babylon is about Rome on one level, but the eventual end of all empires that oppose God on the larger level.</p>	<p>Wednesday Revelation 19-20; Isaiah 65 Jesus leads the armies of God to total victory. All persons are resurrected and judged by Christ.</p>
<p>Thursday Revelation 21-22; Isaiah 66 These two chapters are where Revelation, indeed the entire biblical story, has been pointing. The cosmos and humanity are renewed, restored, and transformed. OT images are piled one on the other to help us see that the new heavens and earth are the fulfillment of all God's promises.</p>	<p>Friday A day for reflection and catching up</p>
<p>Saturday A day for reflection and catching up</p>	

Sermon Notes

Make 2007 a year of transformation!

The Winter Session of the St. Andrew Academy begins the week of Jan. 7. On-line registration is available now at www.standrewacademy.org.

We've got a great line-up of classes for the winter St. Andrew Academy session. Classes include *The Gospel of John*; *Christianity and World Religions*; a new *Beth Moore Study* on the book of Daniel; *Six Strategies to Great Parenting*; *Discovering God's Will for Your Life*; *Finding Purpose Through Your Spiritual Gifts*; *The Miracles of Jesus*; *The Power of the Prophets*; *Spiritual Man-laws: Discussing Fella-ship in Church*; *Christian Meditation and Movement*; *Experiencing Philippians*; *Transformation: Sounds like a lot of work to me!*, and *A Faith to Live By*.

As you can see, this is one of the most exciting set of classes we've ever offered. We can't find the lives we seek merely by trying, it takes training and learning. Make plans now to join us for one or more of these classes. You'll be glad you did. As always, free childcare is available.

Scott Engle's class, *Something More*, meets in Wesley Hall at 9:30 every Sunday.

Scott's Sunday morning class is open to all adults and offers a growing number of opportunities to meet other members of the St. Andrew community. If you are new to St. Andrew or just visiting, the class is a great way to begin getting connected. If you have questions, you are welcome to call Scott Engle at 214-291-8009 or e-mail him at sengle@standrewacademy.org.

ALPHA: exploring deep faith questions to deepen your faith

How can I be sure of my faith? Does God really guide us? What happens when we die? Who is the Holy Spirit and what does He do? Does prayer work?

This fast paced, interactive journey explores the Christian faith in a relaxed, non-threatening manner over ten, thought-provoking weekly sessions. We'll have a relaxed, home cooked dinner together, followed by a lively topic presentation, then discuss our questions together in small groups. ALPHA is a low key, warm & friendly class that gives you an amazing opportunity to grow in your faith.

Wednesdays, January 10 – March 14, 2007

6:15 PM Dinner 7 – 9 PM Topic presentation & discussion

**And don't miss our special Retreat Saturday, February 17th ... 8:30 AM – 5 PM
A full day of refreshing discussion on the Holy Spirit**

To sign-up or ask questions: www.standrewumc.org, click ALPHA