

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
December 24, 2009
Rev. Bob Garrard

Worship Theme: What Happened in Bethlehem?

Isaiah 52: 7-10, Titus 3:4-7, Luke 2: 1-20

Church member, Deanna Dyekman, recently told me a great Christmas story. In fact, after hearing it I changed the worship theme for tonight to, "What happened in Bethlehem?"

We have a marvelous group in the church called Mothers of Preschoolers or MOPS for short. Deanna is the song leader of the 40 or so children who attend. At the November gathering she was going to teach them the Christmas hymn, "O Come All Ye Faithful." Most of the children present had had church experience so they knew the Christmas story and most likely the hymn. To get the children thinking about Christmas, Deanna asked a rhetorical question, "You know what happened in Bethlehem?" To her surprise and delight, one little boy excitedly called out, "What? What happened in Bethlehem?" Deanna explained that a Savior was born in Bethlehem. The little boy responded with even more excitement, and a mixture of disbelief and relief, "I have a Savior!" "I have a Savior!" For two hours he kept exclaiming that he had a Savior. Thank you for sharing this story, Deanna.

It may be a bit of surprise and disappointment to us that a child in our society would not know the story of the birth of Jesus Christ and his connections to Christmas. Sadly, this has become more common because fewer people are part of the Christian faith. We cannot rightly blame the government, the supreme courts or the schools for this ignorance occurring, when, it is up to individual Christians and Christian churches to spread the good news of Jesus Christ. Jesus gave us, not the secular world, the commission to go out to all of the world to spread the word of salvation through him—and, not just at Christmas time, but all year round. Fortunately, Deanna and MOPS are doing this. Deanna wisely used this opportunity to share the wonderful story of Christ with the little boy.

Two things I love about this little boy are his receptivity and honesty. "I have a Savior!" "I have a Savior!" What makes a little boy realize he needs a Savior? The Holy Spirit for sure. It is the Holy Spirit that awakens all of us to our desperate need for a Savior. Yet, I wonder what else is going on in his young life that awakens him to this need? His forthright honesty opened the door for Deanna to share the good news so that he knows he has a Savior! Praise God!

Even though many of us have heard the story of the birth of Jesus so many times we can tell the Christmas story by heart, we are here tonight, because, like the little boy, we know we need a Savior. This is a need people have known and expressed time after time throughout history.

The people of God in the time of our Old Testament lesson from Isaiah knew they needed a Savior. For over 140 years, the people of God in Israel and Judah had gone through wars and being exiled to other nations due to corrupt kings and their own sinful ways. Over and over again they had broken their promises to God and God had to

punish them. They needed a Savior to rescue them, restore their nation and bring them peace.

And in a like manner from the Gospel reading in Luke, the Shepherds to whom the Angels first shared the good news of Jesus' birth knew they needed a Savior. Like Joseph and Mary, they were among the poorest in the land; shepherding was not a lucrative trade, and shepherds were often reviled as shiftless or dishonest. People needed shepherds to watch the sheep, but no one really liked or trusted them. The shepherds needed a Savior.

The rest of God's people at the time Jesus was born needed a Savior. They were under the punishing thumb of the pagan Roman Empire and Roman Emperor Augustus, who claimed that he was the Savior of the world. As we heard last week, corruption and injustices reigned supreme in Judea. All of the people of God needed a Savior.

Even Titus and the people of the early Christian Church on Crete to whom Paul wrote needed a Savior. They had to deal with members who were corrupt, spiteful, insulting and rebellious. Some members of the Church in Crete were treated as second class citizens. The persecutors and the persecuted needed a Savior.

We could take all of these Biblical situations and apply them to our lives today. In some cases some of these hurtful prejudices and oppressions may be happening to us, today. In some cases they may describe our sinful behavior toward others. Either way, if we are as honest as the little boy was, we must admit that we need a Savior.

The little boy's joyful and repetitive, "I have a Savior!" "I have a Savior!" is the reality found in each of the scriptures read tonight. As we heard in the Old Testament, the people of God in Isaiah's day had their lives and nation restored by God. "Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The LORD has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God." These people had a Savior, God himself. Through the voice of Isaiah, God shouted this good news so loud that it continues to echo out to the world some 2600 years later.

The downtrodden shepherds heard the angels joyfully sing out, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" And, they went to find and gaze upon the baby boy, Jesus in a manger. Once, they saw him, they were so filled with joy that they went out into the countryside to tell others of "what happened in Bethlehem." They had a Savior, the Emmanuel, God with us, and could not keep it to themselves. Even today, we can hear their voices tell of that magnificent night.

The early Christians in Crete were reminded by the Apostle Paul that: "when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared"—in Jesus, he saved us. He saved us not because of any good works that we had done, but according to his mercy, through the water of baptism and renewal by the Holy Spirit. This Spirit he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been made right with God, by his grace—his unconditional love, we might inherit the hope of eternal life. What a reminder of the good news this was to those people! They had a Savior; a Savior of mercy and grace who gifted them with everlasting life. They had

Savior who loved them just as they were, and who would save them from all the evil that tried to tear them down. What marvelous reasons to shout to the world over all the centuries, "I have a Savior! I have a Savior!"

In reflecting upon these insights from the scriptures, maybe the question for us tonight is not so much what happened in Bethlehem 2000 years ago, but what is happening to us tonight in Cheyenne, Wyoming, inside the First Presbyterian Church and within our own hearts and minds? Let us pray that we can sense the God who redeemed Israel and Judah from their sins and restored them to peace and wholeness is doing the same for us. Let us pray we can comprehend that the Holy Spirit is pouring God's love and grace in to us to change us from being sinners into his holy people. Let us pray that we are moved by the same Spirit to confess or reaffirm this Jesus born in Bethlehem as our Lord and Savior. Let us pray that we hear and feel God's call to be the ones who are responsible for sharing this good news with all the children, women and men in our community who do not know what happened in Bethlehem—so that they too can shout aloud with the little boy and us, "I have a Savior! I have a Savior?"

(7pm). Let us be very excited about sharing what happened in Bethlehem and in Cheyenne as we joyfully sing, "Go Tell it on the Mountain."

(11pm) Let us be very excited about sharing what happened in Bethlehem and in Cheyenne as we join the angels in boldly singing, "Hark the Herald Angels Sing."