

MONDAY, DECEMBER 7, 2009

Have you considered the “irony” of the Biblical Christmas story? If the baby to be born was to be a king, why a stable and not a palace? If He would be one of the most influential figures of His day and all time, why little Bethlehem and not Rome, the capital of the known world? If He would be the single greatest moral figure of all time, why a pre-marital conception?

Bethlehem, “house of bread” is a remarkable little place only a few miles south of Jerusalem. Through history, God seemed to be preparing this special little place for the most significant birth of all time. What lessons can we learn by looking closely?

Genesis 35 is the first Biblical appearance of this hamlet, in a painful yet promising moment. Jacob had been led of God to return to Bethel, the place where he first encountered God twenty years before (Gen. 28). This time Jacob is accompanied by his entire family, and again his encounter with God is life changing, even receiving a new name...Israel! God had told him to settle his family there, the place he twice encountered God and named it “Bethel, the House of God”. But, sadly, Jacob “moved on from there”. Here’s the first lesson of Bethlehem... it’s dangerous to “move on” from God, leaving Him behind!

What could possibly have been so enticing that Jacob would lead his family away from Bethel??? Maybe the same ‘wanderlust’, the same “greener pastures over there” that have led you to move on from where or what God called you to? In Jacob’s case, it cost him his beloved Rachel, for she died in childbirth “on the way to Bethlehem”! Watch this friends, there’s great pain and sometimes death when you “move on” from God!

However, with God, Bethlehem was also a place of new life, for Benjamin was born in that death moment of “moving on”. Named “son of my trouble” by dying Rachel, Jacob renamed him “son of my right hand” (remember right hand is blessing, authority etc). In other words...a son of hope.

Many years later, Bethlehem would be a place of great death and pain for many young mothers, but also a place of great hope in the birth of one very special Son, Jesus. This Christmas, are you living in “lock step” with God or “moving on”? Don’t wander!

TUESDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2009

Who’s the most compassionate, self-less person you know? The story of Ruth is only 95 little verses. It will take you about 10 minutes to read, and you’ll love it! You’ll find it just before I Samuel...take the time, you won’t regret it, and watch for Bethlehem. What do you see God is doing in this little village?

Sad but joyous, heart breaking yet celebrative, isn’t it? What are some of the wonderful new lessons God seems to want us to learn in this era of Bethlehem? Ruth’s remarkable love for Naomi, even to leaving her homeland and extended family to return with Naomi to Bethlehem to care for her ageing mother-in-law! Is that remarkable, self-sacrificing, compassionate love? Does it begin to paint for us the picture of God coming to earth as the ultimate love expression?

Do you understand “kinsman redeemer”? Boaz was the second closest relative of Naomi, and “kin” were responsible to take care of needy “kin”. Since the closest one was unable, Boaz stepped up and assumed full responsibility for Naomi and Ruth, rescuing both of them from abject poverty and lives of hopeless abandonment! Do you see that is what God did in sending Jesus to rescue us from our hopeless separation from God, our hopelessness in our sin poverty and shame?

Ruth, of course, only had the hope of being a servant to Naomi...nothing more. She’d spend the rest of her life working hard, doing whatever was available, to provide and care for her ageing mother-in-law. It was to be a hard life, a hopeless life, and when Naomi finally would die, Ruth would likely leave Bethlehem and return to her native country of Moab. She was a stranger, a foreigner after all...with only one hope. That hope would be love! Would some compassionate man in Bethlehem love her enough to overlook the fact that she was a foreigner, and see her heart...her wonderful heart of compassion, and love her, and marry her?

A great lesson of Bethlehem is the enormous, boundless, limitless love of God...that heals the broken heart and brings hope to the hopeless. Boaz loved Ruth, protected Ruth, married Ruth and together God gave them a son...not just any son, but the grandfather of David, the future king of Israel!

WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 9, 2009

Three generations, about 75 years, is the bridge between Ruth’s story (yesterday) and David’s in I Samuel 16. We can presume young David knew his grandfather Obed, maybe even his great-grandmother Ruth! Probably David knew well the story of Naomi, Ruth and Boaz, and while sitting on those Bethlehem hillsides watching his father’s sheep graze, looking east, the hills of Moab, Ruth’s homeland, could be seen on a clear day.

The great prophet Samuel and his unexpected visit to Bethlehem were evidently unknown to David until someone came running to his field and told him he was wanted at his home in Bethlehem...quickly, the feast was being held up till he arrived! Read the account and look for links with Jesus.

Often, one key phrase is a life “banner” for a person and for Samuel I believe it is I Samuel 2:35. In the midst of moral and leadership failure in Israel, God had said “*I will raise up for Myself a faithful priest who will do according to what is in My heart and mind.*” That is what brought Samuel to Bethlehem and why he was waiting to anoint as king a little boy he had never met!

Building on the heritage of the past several hundred years in Bethlehem, it was time for God to add more important lessons. “*The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance (of a man) but the LORD looks at the heart.*” David would become known as a “man after God’s heart”. The closeness of David and God would be second only to that of Moses and God. God’s Holy Spirit came upon David in great power that day, and remained with him for the rest of his remarkable life. Remember, at the depth of his failure with Bathsheba, David’s greatest fear was “*do not cast me from Your presence and do not take Your Holy Spirit from me.*” (Psalm 51:11)

On those Bethlehem hillsides, God developed David in his role as shepherd over his father’s sheep. David became a protecting warrior, defending his sheep from wild animals, and later defending his nation from attacking enemies. He became a worshipper eventually bringing the ark to Jerusalem, leading a nation in worship, and leaving his songs (psalms) to touch the hearts of millions for millennia. David became a great king, learning to follow God so he could lead God’s people!

THURSDAY, DECEMBER 10, 2009

Bethlehem, of course, is most famous for the events we find in Matthew 2 and Luke 2. 1000 years after David lived in Bethlehem, the Roman Empire ruled the world and Bethlehem was thrust into world prominence because Rome desired tax revenue. By an Empire wide census Israelis in the family line of David were compelled to return to register in David's hometown...Bethlehem. Joseph of Nazareth was proud he could trace his lineage to David, but this time it would cost him. An ill timed long walk with pregnant Mary, added financial burden for his little carpentry shop, an animal stable as a birthing room rather than her own home and family, what could be worse?

During those three months Mary spent with Elizabeth (Luke 1), do you suppose Mary studied with Zechariah and learned all about the prophecies regarding Messiah? Micah 5:2 would have been one verse they studied together...then perhaps a study of God's great work in Bethlehem over the centuries, as I have done with you this week. If so, I can imagine Mary's heart was filled with anticipation as she approached the little village nestled in the Judean hills south of Jerusalem. She and Joseph likely would have passed Rachel's tomb, the hillsides where David watched his sheep, the road going east which Naomi and Ruth would have walked coming back from Moab, and maybe even David's boyhood home which probably was a "tourist attraction"!

We can safely assume Mary was shunned back in her hometown of Nazareth as she held to her preposterous story of pregnancy with virginity. But the prophecies seemed so joyful, certainly Bethlehem would celebrate, would open their arms for the birth of the One so long awaited? It was time for God to teach us more lessons in Bethlehem...John says it well *"The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world...though the world was made through Him it did not recognize Him. He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him."* (John 1)

The big business of Empire politics, the opportunity for bountiful profits with such an influx of people in Bethlehem, the swarms of people...no one heard the little voice in the stable. Is it the same today? What's interfering with your Advent "God encounter"?

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 11, 2009

The Christmas Concert begins this evening at Calvary, 7:00 p.m. I hope you've invited many friends and you'll make this weekend an intentional and fun-filled celebration of hope!

Could the contrast between visitors to Joseph and Mary be any greater? Uneducated, rough, foul smelling shepherds breathless having run from the fields outside Bethlehem, and sophisticated, educated, gift bearing Magi weary from a very long journey from a distant land. What's the lesson God wants us to learn? Remember Jesus' words *"God so loved the world that He sent His only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall have eternal life."* (John 3:16) Or the prophet Isaiah's words *"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to Him."* (Is. 11:10) Get it? God's reach to our world through the incarnation of Jesus Christ is His reach to every person on the planet in every generation! Is your heart open to all?

Angels in the sky to inform shepherds (Luke 2). An astrological phenomena to inform Magi (Matt. 2). Students of history and prophecy to inform Herod (Matt. 2). But oh, the contrast of response once the invitation was understood!

As the shepherds sat wide eyed in the stable with Mary and Joseph, staring at the baby, do you suppose Mary remembered the little shepherd boy David whom God chose to be king because his heart was pure, trusting, available to God? These shepherds were the first to see Messiah.

When the Magi explained the night sky phenomena and the distance they'd traveled following the starlight, and as they placed their gifts before Him, do you suppose Mary remembered Naomi and Ruth coming from a distant land in hopes they would find a future in Bethlehem again...and Boaz's kindness?

But, whenever God is doing a wonderful work, there is an enemy determined to keep humanity in bondage, in darkness. (Ephesians 6:10-12; 1 Peter 5:8) Herod's selfish, paranoid, prideful heart was fertile ground for this enemy of God to develop a plan to stop the Hope born in Bethlehem. However, remember Isaiah 46:11-13?? An angel was sent to warn Joseph. He had learned the Bethlehem lessons well and he obeyed immediately (Matt. 2). Can you live alert to God like that?



Pastor Doug Anderson

DECEMBER 7 - 11, 2009

behold
&
believe

THE IRONY

A Disciplemaking Tool
DIGGING
DEEPER

Calvary
Community Church

Engaging With God

Highway 50 & Harris Road
P.O. Box 1200 • Williams Bay, WI 53191
(262) 245-6294
www.calvarycommunity.net