

## **“MAKING ROOM FOR THE CHILD”**

**Scripture Lessons: Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 2:1-7**

*This sermon was preached by Dr. Daniel W. Massie on Sunday, December 6, 2009 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, SC.*

As we were reminded in the lighting of the second candle on the advent wreath, this candle is often referred to as the Bethlehem Candle and symbolizes the importance of preparing for the arrival of the Christ child. It will not be long before we sing a beloved carol that charges us, “Let every heart prepare him room.” But how do you go about doing that really? How does one go about making room for the arrival of the child of Christmas?

May I suggest to you this morning that there are some real parallels between preparing room for the arrival of any child and preparing room for the arrival of the Christ child. Of the former I modestly consider myself something of an expert, having gone through the experience on four occasions. And since two of our daughters happen to have been born shortly after Christmas, I also distinctly remember the chaos, the confusion, and also the joy that accompanied getting ready for the arrival of one’s own child while you are also preparing for the Christ child. However, since our last child was born 27 years ago and my memories of the birthing experience have faded a bit. But more recently I have also observed the preparations made for five grandchildren in recent years.

When people discover that they are soon to be parents, whether it is their first or their fourteenth child, there are certain physical preparations that require attention. For example, it’s nice to have a place for the baby to sleep. And so, if you plan ahead, you can buy or borrow a baby bed, a pack ‘n play, and possibly a bassinet to put beside your own bed for the first few months (Actually I am not sure how wise it is to have your first baby too near your own bed. First time parents are so anxious that when they wake up in the middle of the night and hear the baby breathing they think that

it is dying and if they do not hear it breathing they assume it is already died. It can be a nerve racking experience.) Put the baby in a nearby room and, believe me, you will know when you are needed.

It is also nice to have some clothing prepared for the new baby to wear. For a second child this means going through all of the discarded hand me downs that have been carefully packed away in the attic somewhere in order to see what can be used, depending on whether it's a winter or a summer baby.

Back when we were birthing babies, physical preparation also included certain exercises and classes to train us for the actual birth experience. Tita and I carefully rehearsed all of the breathing techniques and exercises that were taught in Lamaze classes for husband-coached child birth back in those days. We wanted to be physically and intellectually prepared so that we would know precisely what was happening when it happened and thus assist in any way we could.

Now if one of the parents happens to be a preacher, there are other physical preparations including finding a standby preacher ready to take charge of the worship service should the baby decide to arrive on a Sunday. People in other professions have to make their own arrangements as well. But as much as is possible, it is wise to clear one's calendar of unnecessary activities and also to cancel, if at all possible, all out of town trips as the due date approaches.

Now all of these physically preparations are nice, of course, but we need to remember what the Scotsman Bobby Burns said and that is that "the best laid schemes o' mice and men, gang aft a-gley," meaning loosely that they go haywire! Babies come when they are ready, not when the parents are! They refuse to wait for bassinets or booties or even carefully trained fathers who have been known to holler "push" when they meant to holler "pant" and thus offered little help to either the mother or the

physician. And Joseph and Mary are clear evidence that not every out of town trip can be avoided either.

In a similar way, a few physical preparations are also advisable if you would make room for the arrival of the Christ child during this season. It would be smart not to overload your schedule with so many parties and commitments that you have neither the time nor the energy to celebrate the birth of the child. It would also be wise to make sure the calendar includes moments for prayer and meditation and occasions for you and your loved ones to worship and study and help others in some concrete fashion. Things quickly get crazy & chaotic at Christmas and we can lose our focus and overlook the reason for the season. Consider Pieter Bruegel the Elder's rendering of the "Census at Bethlehem. As you study this wonderful painting by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Dutch Renaissance artist you can see the bustle of activity with the manner of people going about their busy lives. Bethlehem is portrayed as a Flemish village and unless you are very observant you may miss the arrival of Mary and Joseph who are arriving to be registered.

Physical preparations would also include the proper care and maintenance of ones own health. Unfortunately, too many people allow their self-discipline and their moderate lifestyles to take a holiday during this festive season. They give in to the constant temptation to eat too much, to drink too much, and consequently are physically exhausted, if not ill, by the time Christmas day arrives.

But while physical preparations are in order if we are making room for a child, far more important are the intangible things --- the mental, the emotional, and spiritual preparations that are incumbent upon one who truly desires to make room for a child soon to be born. A baby need not have the frills and fancies in order to feel welcomed and wanted. Bassinets are nice, but a manger will do in a pinch. And a dresser drawer worked for my own father for several months, I am often told. Babies

actually require very little space, hardly any food, and just a small amount of clothing. But what they do require and what any expectant family should be most concerned about providing are two things --- an attitude of receptiveness and an atmosphere of love. Let me expand on these two essentials of preparation.

An attitude of receptiveness: If you would make room for a child in your heart and life, then you must recognize that this helpless, totally dependent, crying, wetting little package is nothing less than the creation of God and the Lord's personal gift to you and to your world. I believe with the Apostle Paul that "in everything God works for good with those who love him" and therefore no birth is accidental, or unintended, nor removed from God's loving purposes for his creation. It may seem paradoxical, but of all God's gifts to his creation and to his creatures, babies may be the most powerful and most truly significant beyond the gift of his own son. Some years ago I was given an anonymous quote that makes precisely this point:

In the early days of the nineteenth century,  
men were anxiously following the march of Napoleon  
and were feverishly awaiting the latest news of the war.  
And all the while, in their homes babies were being borne.

In one year, 1809 – laying midway between Trafalgar and Waterloo –  
there stole into the world a host of heroes!  
William Gladstone, at Liverpool.  
Alfred Tennyson, at Somersby.  
Oliver Wendell Holmes, in Massachusetts.  
Charles Darwin, at Shrewsbury.  
Abraham Lincoln, in Old Kentucky.  
Music was enriched by the advent of Chopin at Warsaw and Mendelssohn at Hamburg.

But nobody thought of babies.  
Everybody was thinking of battles.  
yet viewing that age in truer perspective which  
time enables us to command, we may well ask ourselves-  
"Which of the battles of 1809 mattered more than the babies of 1809?"

When a wrong wants righting,

When a work wants doing,  
When a truth wants preaching,  
When a continent wants opening,  
God sends a babe into the world to do it.  
That is why, long, long ago,  
A BABY BOY WAS BORN IN BETHLEHEM.

Yes, we make room for a child by creating an attitude of receptiveness. If all parents and all families were to receive each child as God's special gift to them and to their world, no doubt fewer children would grow up feeling unwanted and fewer adults would end up being mentally and emotionally scared.

In a similar vein, we make room for the Christ child by an attitude of receptiveness as well. You can only welcome him when you are able to see and to celebrate that this child is God's unique gift to you personally as well as God's gift to the world "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God." (Eph 2:8)

Jesus Christ and the new life he offers are a divine gift to the world, a gift capable of transforming every person, every home, every institution on the face of the earth. And yet, a gift is not really a gift until it is accepted and received. If I were to offer you a gift and you never acknowledged or opened it or received it --- would it really be a gift from me to you? I think not. So it is with Christ and the gift of the babe in the manger. Before he is truly God's gift to us, he must be acknowledged and received as such. We claim this gift by acknowledging him as our personal Lord and Savior. And this involves a conscious and genuine decision on the part of anyone who would receive this gift, a decision to allow Jesus Christ to have preeminence in every area of our living.

In the prologue to John's gospel we read: "The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world . . . he came to his own home and his own people received him not. But to all

who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God.” To welcome the Christ, therefore, one must have an attitude of receptiveness. So I ask you on this second Sunday of Advent, have you acknowledged and received this child as your personal Savior and the Lord of your entire life? I do not mean just a portion of your life. Is he the Lord of your private life as well as your public life? Is he the Lord of your life on Friday evening as well as Sunday morning? Is he the Lord of your family life, your business life, your finances, and all of your relationships? Is he the Lord of your thinking and acting and doing and desiring? Calling him Lord is not sufficient “Not everyone who says unto me, ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.” You can call him Lord but not give him Lordship!

In addition to making physical preparations to make room for a child and in addition to providing an attitude of receptiveness for a child’s arrival, we also make room for any child through creating an atmosphere of love. Without an environment of love according to the best psychological studies, there is a distorting of emotional development and a stunting of intellectual growth. Studies over the years have indicated that young children in the early months and years of their lives who are separated from parents who love and tend them often experience various maladies physical, mental and emotional. There is simply nothing that can replace an environment of love when a new child arrives on the scene.

If you would prepare for the coming of a new child into your own home and heart, you would be well advised to give priority to creating an environment of love. And this has to do with more than the responses of individual family members to that new child alone. It also concerns how family members relate to one another, for a child soon picks up on these things and is affected by it. The parent or sibling who drinks too much, who criticizes too much, who selfishly demands too much, who fights too much, who curses or complains or pouts too much, does irreparable harm to this essential

environment of love. And the young child in such a loveless situation not only feels unloved, but often guilty and even responsible for the disharmony in the home. The love of which I am speaking must be verbalized but it must also be actualized in a variety of ways within the home if one truly wishes to make room for a child in his or her life.

By the same token, if we would devote ourselves to making room for the child in the manger, it is equally appropriate that we also seek in this season to create and enhance an atmosphere of love in us and about us. And how do we do this inasmuch as the Christ child is not physically present that we might embrace him or wipe his tears or soothe his hurts? Jesus foresaw this problem and he provided some solutions in scripture. In John 14 he says: "If you love me you will keep my commandments." That is to say, we demonstrate our love for the Christ of Christmas by being faithful and obedient to the life he lived and to the words he spoke. And Jesus also added that haunting vision of Matthew 25 which reminds us, "As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me." And that, my friends, opens up before us countless ways of expressing our love for the Christ, and thereby creating an environment of love for the Lord's welcome and reception.

And so, for any who are interested in making room for the Holy Child of Bethlehem this Christmas, I would encourage you to first tend to those minor physical preparations that will afford you the time, energy and opportunity to celebrate his coming; secondly, I would encourage you to receive this child as God's personal gift to you as well as God's gift to the world; and thirdly, I would encourage you to live out your love for Christ by loving him and loving others in his name. And if we do that, we will have "prepared him room" during this season for his expected arrival.

*Prayer: Gracious God, give us the grace to open our lives entirely to the Christ child that we might welcome him, receive him, and share him with the world. And then we will worship him not only as the babe in the manger, but as the Lord of Lords and the King of Kings. Amen.*