



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“GOING HOME FROM BETHLEHEM”

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 2:1-20

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, January 6, 2019
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And 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.

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

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’

When 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.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

Christmas is one of those singular occasions in the life of Christ's church for which we wait with the greatest of anticipation. We began our spiritual preparation for Christ to be born in Bethlehem nearly five weeks in advance of Christmas and with the beginning of the season of Advent.

The Advent Wreath, the Christmon Tree, the Poinsettias...each of them helped to lead us to that particular moment – that individual and ecclesiastical crescendo that we call Christmas! And what a joy it was to have successfully made our way to the cradle of Christ as the carol declares: “the stars in the sky looked down where he lay.” In fact, this morning we affirm that the very star revealed for the world that Christ was born – “that Christ was here.”

Of course, knowing what we now know, it is time for us – as it was for the magi and the shepherds of long ago - to leave the refuge of that spiritual stable and travel back to the east, or back to Nazareth, back to taking care of all of the things we were taking care of before the birth of Christ.

And so, this morning, I want us to explore together some of the things that we can see and experience, not on the road to Bethlehem, mind you, but on the trip back home.

The scriptures tell us that, “the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen as it had been told to them.” And indeed, through the eyes of Scripture, we too have beheld the glory of God, and while we might feel comfortable and might even prefer to stay by the cradle until eternity is nigh, we simply can't do that. At some point we must return home. At some point, if we haven't done so already, we will need to take down our trees and we will put away our lights for another year. Many of us will have bills to pay.

In no time at all, each of us find ourselves firmly back on the bedrock of reality; yet, even when that moment comes, we remain different because of what we have seen and what we have heard because of what we, by God's grace, have come to believe! We should know by now that God did not put his child in the cradle and wrap him in bands of cloth so that we could remain the same and act as if nothing ever really happened. No! God's love, revealed in the birth of his Son, our Savior, in Bethlehem, it changes everything!

Today is called “Epiphany” which is the church's way of celebrating the miracle that God became human and dwelled among us, and we have seen it – “the glory as of a father's son, full of grace and truth.” So let us begin our journey home from Bethlehem, and on the way, let us pay very close attention to how things may have changed...how we may have changed.

I dare say that one of the first things we will observe is something within, an awareness that we have experienced a singular moment of transcendence. We have beheld the miracle that is the Word made flesh, and nothing and no one can ever take that from us.

Imagine how the shepherd must have felt...what must have been going through their minds on their way home? I certainly don't think they were going back to their fields wondering if the sheep had nibbled the grass down to nothing. I seriously doubt that they were singing the same old song that they were singing prior to the angels telling them the wonderful news of Jesus' birth? No! Things were different ...granted, their journey home was for them probably a very dull moment in comparison, and yet with each passing step, underneath a sky that was

probably a lot less starry than before -- they were nevertheless remembering that previous moment...that moment in which they knew the power of God as they had never known it before.

I recently found myself thinking about those first successful climbers of Mt. Everest and how they must have felt when some time later they were back at work doing whatever it is that they were accustomed to doing. Deep down inside they must have felt different. After all, they knew something of the world and of adventure that no one could possibly fathom unless they had also been there. But they, like the shepherds, and like us...they came to realize that life is not lived on the mountaintops, but rather in the valleys down below; but, still, for us having been there...we have that...we will always have that moment!

Another thing we will experience while going home from Bethlehem is joy. Remember the paralyzed man in the Bible, the one who got up and was jumping and leaping and praising God; that one leper out of ten who returned to Jesus to say thank you? The woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and dried them with her hair; those people responded as they did because of what we have seen in the manger.

Make no mistake about it, as we settle back into our routines, the real world may seem harsh at times and it may seem to bear down upon some people more heavily than others. Goodness knows, the Apostle Paul can be counted among those people who had a difficult life by anyone's standards, and yet he was able to say in the midst of life's trials, "rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice." Friends, Paul could say that because he knew the joy of Christ. In other words, he had been to Bethlehem.

Oh, we must always remember what the angel said, "I am bringing you good news of great joy." Oh, let the world slap us with its backhand if it wants to; let it knock us down in the busyness of this year or next; let it throw financial turmoil in our direction or tension nationally or globally, or disaster of any sort; we can still have joy and we can still give glory to God precisely because of what we have seen and heard.

Consider this that only on our journey home from Bethlehem can we delight in knowing that God is now knowable. Think about that again. Before the manger we did not understand this. God had felt to us distant before now, choosing to reveal himself in the form of earthquakes, and wind, and fire, and droughts, and locusts, and plagues, and floods, and burning bushes, and rainbows.

Oh, just the thought of a Godly encounter was enough to make us tremble in our boots...but in the manger we find something different -- we find mercy, a divine love that we can touch and feel and hold. The shepherds returned home glorifying and praising God because God had become like one of us. He had become a tender child that is warm and vibrant and radiant. God Almighty subjecting himself to the pangs of birth and ultimately to the pain of death...so that we might come to know his love and have life in his name!

Do you know what strikes me the most about our journey home from Bethlehem? It is that we do so with the experience of having gone to the manger. Sadly, not everyone has made the trip;

not everyone has had that experience. You see, for some people, Bethlehem is second hand knowledge.

Oh, it was wonderful to see the children of our church family this season, to see them on several occasions sing the songs that we have come to know and love...songs like: "Away in a manger no crib for his bed." But what about us? What about the world? What I mean is this...faith cannot be acquired from a song. One cannot simply read about Bethlehem in the *Post and Courier* - we have to go and see it with our own eyes.

The praise and joy that the shepherds experienced on their way home was not a joy that belonged to someone else. It was their joy; it was their song; and that is what finally and fully matters, and that is the wonderful message that we have to share with the world. Simply put, one cannot go home from Bethlehem until they have actually been there, for that is the very thing that gives purposeful melody to our words and direction to our steps - the fact that we actually experienced for ourselves the birth of our Savior. That Christ has been born in our life.

In the coming days, when we have finished writing our thank you notes, when we have put away the ribbons and the tissue paper for another year, when we have finished the last slice of apple pie or whatever it is that you need to eat before it goes bad-- the one abiding quality of this season is to be found in what we have seen and heard! Not what we have heard someone else say; not what we have heard our teachers or pastors say on the matter. No! The only thing that enables us to return home glorifying and praising God is that there is actually a place from which we are returning, and what an amazing place it was, the ultimate expression of God's love, revealed in a child, relating to us in every way imaginable, knowing us inside and out – tempted in every way as we are!

Oh, in the end, going home from Bethlehem is a most wonderful journey, for it is a journey marked by a singular and transcendent moment, the likes of which the world had never seen. It is a journey marked by unmistakable if not indescribable joy, for God is personal and relatable. Ah, but above all else, we leave Bethlehem knowing that it is a journey that we simply had to make.

As we meet other people along life's journey, may they find us - like the shepherds of old - glorifying and praising God and sharing the Good News! But we cannot let them take our word for it...they have to go themselves, so let us invite them! Let us do whatever we can to help them get there. For all the talk about Advent and Christmas, for all of the deep thoughts about theology and ministry, no one can go home from Bethlehem, unless they were actually there. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

**The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.*