

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt  
Glenshaw Presbyterian Church  
First Sunday after Christmas  
December 27, 2009

### **In Pursuit of Christmas**

Luke 2:41-52; Colossians 3:12-17

Can you believe it's already the Sunday after Christmas?  
And we're about to turn into the New Year? 2010!

Just a few weeks ago we were saying,  
    "Wow, can you believe it's already almost Christmas?"  
You know, it comes around the same time every year.  
    but we always say that, don' we?  
Why do we say that?  
    I mean, most of us can count to 365, right?

Time flies - when you're having fun, and even when you're not.

I was in Giant Eagle yesterday  
    to pick up just a few things we ran out of  
    during the Christmas feasting and left-overing.  
I saw a one of the Dad's I know from James's sports teams  
    (his name is Mike, too),  
    and the conversation went like this.  
Look up, catch the eye, smile.  
Smile back, "Hey Mike!"  
"Hey Mike!"  
Still walking toward each other.  
"How was your Christmas?"  
We pass, still walking.  
"Great!"  
Now looking over the shoulder without slowing the pace.  
"How about yours?"  
"Fantastic!"  
Smile and nod, "Take it easy, Mike."  
Smile and nod. "You too, Mike."  
Never slowed the pace.  
And on we went, in pursuit of our goal,  
    to conquer Giant Eagle on the day after Christmas.

Last Sunday

    which feels like a month ago now,  
    I must've hit a nerve when I talked about being stressed out over Christmas,  
    and not feeling ready, or focused, or very peaceful  
    about the arrival of this holy day.  
Quite a number of you told me that really hit home.  
Getting ready for Christmas often feels less like cheerful preparation  
    and more like hot pursuit.

But perhaps we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves  
about this seeming disconnect between our December state of mind  
and the true Spirit of Christmas,  
because, actually, our frenzied attention to the matters of life,  
that leave us brain-fried and bone-tired  
may have more to do with the Spirit of Christmas  
than it seems at first.

Christmas is about Incarnation - not De-carnation.

It is about God becoming flesh,  
not about us leaving flesh  
and entering some state of perfect, peaceful, spiritual equilibrium.  
The Word became flesh and dwelt among us -  
it didn't lift us out of our earthly experience  
with all the needs that press in upon us.

\* \* \* \* \*

Consider Mary and Joseph.  
Out-of-wedlock pregnancy? Social ostracism?  
A 70 mile trek on a donkey just to deal with Roman bureaucracy?  
I may seem obvious to *us*  
how the gift of The Incarnation changed their lives for the better,  
but was it obvious to them at the time?

The angels had done an admirable job of explaining it all to them.  
When Mary receives her Christmas calling from the Angel Gabriel,  
telling her of a new vocation God has given, to be the mother of Jesus,  
she accepts willingly,  
*Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.*

But, angelic announcement or not,  
there is no way she could be prepared for all that will follow the manger.  
This Bethlehem stable is only the first stop on a long journey with this child,  
back and forth between Egypt and Palestine, in the early years,  
protecting Jesus from those who sought to kill him.

Then watching him grow up for 12 years in Nazareth.  
(Those 12 years passed in...three days!...for us.  
Having a 12 year old myself, I know it felt almost that fast for Mary and Joseph.)  
Mary and Joseph have taken their calling very seriously,  
and have maintained a devout lifestyle...  
...they've had their baby circumcised on the eighth day,  
and named him Jesus, as commanded.  
...they've carefully followed the law of Moses in Mary's subsequent purification  
and in presenting Jesus in the Temple.  
...and it has become their custom to make the journey to Jerusalem,  
every year for Passover.  
Probably a 5-day journey to get there, and 5 days back.

Luke says, when Jesus is 12 years old,  
they went up to Jerusalem “*as usual*” for the festival  
The words, *as usual* (*ethos* in the Greek) suggests a custom, or habit,  
a pattern of behavior fixed by tradition.  
Even though there is nothing else written about the young Jesus in the scriptures,  
we at least know that he grew up with parents  
who made it a habit of obeying the Law of Moses,  
and who were devout in their participation in worship.  
In short, Mary and Joseph are knocking themselves out  
to be good Jewish parents for their child.

But today their pursuit takes on a frantic nature.  
Have you ever lost your child in a crowd, out in public?  
If so you probably still get butterflies just thinking about it.  
All the worst things go through your mind.

We can imagine the agony of these devout parents,  
who’ve been trying to do everything right,  
and this is what they have to show for it:  
they have lost Jesus, not just for a few minutes,  
but for an entire day’s journey.

When they go back to Jerusalem it takes them 3 days of searching to find him.  
Can you imagine!?  
When at last they do find him,  
the frustration of Mary’s question reveals the intense stress they have been under:  
*Child, why have you treated us like this?*  
*You father and I have been worried sick looking all over for you.*  
They probably grounded him and took away his cell phone.

How could the peace announced by the angels have turned into this?

Just like Mary and Joseph,  
we would all like to stay in those glorious moments  
in the peaceful, blissful rest of a newborn sleeping in his mother’s arm,  
warmed by her loving gaze, and the adoration of visitors.  
But we know, and Mary must suspect, that life with Jesus will require more than this.  
She has said “Yes” to the Angel Gabriel, once.  
But it seems it will be “yes” and “yes” and “yes, again” to God,  
as Mary pursues her Christmas calling time and time and time again:  
sometimes hot pursuit, and often anxious, confusing, troubling.

Even when Jesus explains that he was only pursuing his own calling,  
being about his Father’s business,  
Luke tells us that *they did not understand what he said to them.*

So when our translation tells us that Mary *treasured* all these things in her heart,  
that may sound a bit more positive than was intended.

It is more accurate to say that she *kept* all these things in her heart;  
she mulled them over, pondered them,  
and probably did a good deal of motherly fretting about them.

This journey with Jesus, this living out of her Christmas calling,  
this great mystery of the Incarnation,  
would often require of Mary to be patient and persistent  
and to keep trusting with all her heart  
that God would be faithful to God's plan.

\* \* \* \* \*

In the Eastern Church, Mary is called the *theotokos*,  
which means "the God bearer"  
Mary, the mother of Jesus, bears God into the world.  
So, in one sense, she is not like us.  
And yet we cannot hear Mary's story without thinking of our own.  
God call us into the unknown future, into challenges that seem far beyond our means.  
God calls us to love Jesus, to follow him wherever he leads us;  
to love those Jesus loves  
which can require more energy and stamina  
than we ever thought we had.

We, like Mary, are called on a journey  
in which we discover the meaning of the Incarnation  
for our lives, and our world.  
The journey takes our whole lives, it takes our whole heart, and mind, and strength.

Like Mary, we say yes once to God. Then we must say it again. And again.  
And just when we think we've got things figured out,  
God's plan takes a new turn,  
and we must say yet another, trusting "yes."  
*Here am I...let it be with me according to your word.*

And each time, as we continue on,  
we, also, become...  
...God-bearers in the world.  
The Incarnation means that, too.  
In a real sense,  
Christ is born in our hearts,  
so that we then make him present to those we meet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Think of it as your new Christmas clothing. That's how Paul describes it.  
Did any of you receive new clothes, or new shoes, or fancy, furry boots,  
or a watch, or jewelry for Christmas?

If so, do you plan on packing them away without wearing them?

Maybe pull them out next Christmas?

Paul says we all got new clothes for Christmas,  
and we ought to begin wearing them, right away:  
*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves  
with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience... and the like.  
...Above all clothe yourselves with love,  
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.*

By wearing these new clothes, we show forth who we are:  
We are the Christmas people;  
the people who have received the astounding gift of the Incarnation,  
the breathtaking reality of God-with-us.

If ever there was a gift that should not be simply packed away  
and brought out once a year, it is the Incarnation  
The Incarnation remains with us, through every day of the coming year,  
be it a peaceful day, or a hectic day,  
a day filled with pleasure or with pain.  
The gift of God-With-Us  
can transform our lives into something new, every day.  
Our new Christmas clothing can be worn into work on Monday morning,  
and on the first day back to school, and every day after that -  
as you're stuck in traffic, standing in line at the checkout,  
sitting at the kitchen table paying bills;  
you can even wear them to bed,  
even when all you have on is a hospital gown.

So please, do not try to pack The Incarnation away with your other Christmas ornaments;  
truth is, you wouldn't be able to even if you tried.  
Far from being left behind in the Christmas season,  
the Incarnation goes ahead of us  
and calls us forward into the rest of our lives.  
We have a new holy pursuit to direct all our pursuits:  
we are God-bearers for the world.

Through you and me, God keeps giving the gift of Christmas  
to the world.