

Advent Sermon Series: Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam

Sermon: "What is Really Important?"

Salem United Methodist Church; November 29, 2015

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Today we begin the season of Advent-the four Sundays before the birth of Jesus the Christ. Advent is a season of waiting-waiting for Christ to come in his birth and for Christ to come again. Advent is a season of being expectant-expecting God to break through into our world. This expectancy will be our focus for this Advent. We will be searching for or "Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam." We will be looking for those moments when Christ breaks through our Christmas chaos and confusion.

In the church we call this season of Advent, but in the world this season is called the Christmas season. So my question for us today is, "What is Advent/Christmas season like for you?" Are there moments of bedlam or chaos that occurs every year during this time between Thanksgiving and Christmas? If there are, can you name them? Choose no more than three and write them down. For me, this season of preparation is a gradual crescendo which climaxes not on Christmas Day, but Christmas Eve. Each day, each week, during Advent I do something to prepare for the Christmas festivities. I plan worship, decorate the house, think about what I want to give to whom and then purchase or make it, visit our shut-ins, sing in concerts, go to concerts. Christmas music is very important to me in preparing my heart for the real meaning of Christmas. There is such a wealth of Christian Christmas songs that are part of the secular music. I love hearing *Joy to the World* or *O Come All Ye Faithful* when shopping or on the radio. They remind me that Christ came not just for me, but for everyone in the store, including the pushy ones. Even if the shoppers do not recognize Jesus as the Messiah that doesn't stop God's love being poured out-a love that came to us in human form, in a baby. Bedlam or chaos for me comes when I put too much stress on myself. When I think I must have everything perfect. When I think I have to bake or make whatever foods have been the tradition in our family. Being a pastor has helped me learn to put a stop to stressing myself out. I just can't do several different worship services and have everything perfectly ready for Christmas. I've learned that Jesus doesn't care if the tree is up, or if the cookies get baked, or even if gifts get wrapped. Jesus comes with or without all our self-created Christmas traditions. Jesus' birthday isn't about all of these. Jesus comes to teach us, to save us from our sins, and to be that tangible face of God's perfect grace and love. This is what it means to me to find Bethlehem in the midst of bedlam.

However, when we think of Bethlehem we think of the Christmas carols like "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "Silent Night" where all is peaceful and calm. After all Bethlehem is the home of Rachel's tomb, David's coronation, and Jesus' birth. We think of shepherds abiding in the field. Well, even shepherding can be bedlam. Do you know what Bethlehem is like today? It is a bustling town of about 30,000 people. And it is not a calm little town at all. In 1995 as a result of the Israel-Palestinian Agreement, Bethlehem was turned over to the Palestinian Authority. Bethlehem today is a place of confusion, fear, and hate. In the past few years most of Bethlehem's Christians have emigrated out of the Palestinian territory to avoid persecution from the Muslim majority. This past week out of retaliation for the assassination of an Israeli cabinet minister by Palestinians, Israeli tanks moved into Bethlehem near Rachel's Tomb and drove down the streets near the Church of the Nativity, the place believed to be the birth place of Jesus. Bethlehem in the 21st century is bedlam.

First century Bethlehem was also. We will talk more about this in upcoming Sundays in Advent, but our Christmas story begins before the trek to Bethlehem. It begins with a visit by the angel Gabriel to a young girl, Mary. We read this passage from Luke every Advent season, but perhaps we don't stop to think what kind of bedlam this "good news" created for Mary. The passage begins with God initiating the visit by sending Gabriel who says, "The Lord is with you." The text states that Mary is confused or perplexed. Realizing that God has come to us, that God is with us, can be puzzling and mystifying at the same time. How can God be with us? The idea is a bit frightening, but Gabriel reassures Mary and tells her not to be afraid. God chose her to carry the Son of God whom she is to call Jesus. The news is more than she can comprehend. It would be for any of us. So she asks, "How?" She is not married. She is a young woman from a poor village which is ruled by the Roman Empire. She has no power or standing in her community. Besides being pregnant and not married was a certain death sentence. Gabriel reassures Mary that the Holy Spirit will be with her. This is no small thing. I love the phrasing, "The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you." What

reassurance! In the midst of bedlam, the Holy Spirit is present, overshadowing. When I think of overshadow, I think of something that covers, like a warm, protective blanket. When the bedlam hits, God's power is with us, covering us, protecting us, providing for us. But wait, there is more for Mary! She will have a companion throughout her pregnancy, but not just any companion. Her cousin Elizabeth, an older woman, who was barren is already pregnant. God is with Mary. God is providing for Mary. God is even protecting Mary. I love the line where Gabriel states, "Nothing is impossible for God." What reassurance these words must have had for Mary! What reassurance they are for us, when we face the chaos and bedlam in our lives, when we face the not-so-good news or the bad news or the terrible news. "Nothing is impossible for God." And so what is Mary's response? "Here I am, Lord. I am your servant." In the midst of the bedlam of this not-so-good news, Mary says, "Yes" to God and it becomes the best news for all humanity.

Have you ever said, "Yes," to God? What happens when we do? Several things happen. First, we usually discover who God is and what God is like. A little boy named Tommy was told to wash his hands before dinner because he had germs on his hands. When he got to the table, he began eating. His mother said, "Wait, Tommy. We must thank God for our food first." Tommy replied, "Germs and God. That's all I ever hear and I've never seen either." We can identify with Tommy, but Jesus' birth in Bethlehem puts a face on God for us. As the Colossians passage states, "The Son is the image of the invisible God." Through Jesus we know who God is and what God is like. In Jesus we see God's love, compassion, mercy; God's seeking heart and God's purity. Jesus came to show us the truth about God and the truth about ourselves. We do not see God as an angry judge or a power monger, but one who cares and understands. As we find Bethlehem we come to know not only who God is, but who God is in our lives.

Second, when we say, "Yes," to God we discover just how important people are to us. They become more important than trinkets or baubles that go out of style, or toys that break. Have you ever spent hours and hours looking for the hottest item that is at the top of everyone's gift list? Then months later discover it in the back of the closet or worse in the garbage. People are important to us. This is why we give gifts at Christmas. It is a way to say we love them, we care about them. They are special to us. Giving gifts is not about seeing who receives the most gifts. We exchanged names for Christmas this past Thursday. My seven year old granddaughter asked what we were doing. I told her we were exchanging names so that we only have to give one family member one gift. Then I asked her if she wanted her name put in the pile. She exclaimed with a resounding, "No! That's not fair! That just is not fair! I want more than one gift!" And almost burst into tears. I assured her that we would not put her name in the pile so we could all give her a gift out of our great love for her. In this instance, she is more important than all the gifts she will receive from her grandparents, aunts and uncles!

Third, when we say, "Yes," to God we discover what really matters. We begin to reorganize our priorities. Is rushing around trying to create the perfect Christmas really worth it? Or is sitting with a friend or neighbor who is sick or lonely or hurting perhaps more important than all the rushing? Here's a story about priorities. A church adopted two children whose father was unemployed. Jack agreed to take the children shopping for some toys and gave each \$10. As they walked through one toy store after another, the boys didn't seem much interested in any toys. Finally the man from the church said, "What would you boys like to get?" They replied, "Can we go to the shoe store? We want to get work boots for our Daddy so he can get a job." So they went to the shoe store. One of the boys pulled out a piece of paper with the outline of their father's foot and gave it to the store manager to find the right size. When they went to pay for them, the boots cost \$40. They only had \$20 between them. The store manager told them that the boots were on sale for \$20. A few weeks later Jack bumped into their father who said, "I thank God for people like you who care." And that he had found a job. Jack looked down at the man's feet. He was wearing the work boots. Jack responded, "I thank God for the lesson your two sons taught me. Christmas is more than one day. Christmas is every day."

Earlier I asked you to write down any moments of bedlam or chaos you expect to happen during this Advent/Christmas season. Look at this list. Are there ways to let go of them? Ways to avoid them or eliminate them? Write down ways you can break through the bedlam. As these moments crop up, pray, "Come, Lord Jesus, come." You just may discover what is really important.

Resources: *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam* by James Moore; "Israeli Tanks Move Into Bethlehem," www.dailymail.co.uk; <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/vie/Bethlehem.html>; *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* by James Martin

