

Advent Sermon Series: Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam

Sermon: "Remind Us Again"

Micah 5:2-5a; Luke 1:39-55; Luke 2:1-7

Salem United Methodist Church; December 20, 2015

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On this fourth Sunday of Advent, there is less than a week before Christmas Eve. Are you finding Bethlehem in the midst of your Christmas bedlam?

Every Christmas we put up Christmas trees, decorations, and lights to remind us again of Christmas. They are symbols of what Christmas means. The evergreen tree reminds us that God's love never dies. The Christmas decorations on the tree can be symbols of who Jesus is. For instance, we decorate the church tree with Chrismons which are monograms and symbols that remind us of Jesus. Some are easier to interpret than others. For instance, there is one that looks like a baby in the manger. That's easy. But then there are others that are more difficult to interpret like one that represents Jesus as the Alpha and the Omega. Along with Christmas trees, we decorate with wreaths. Along with the evergreen of the wreath that reminds us that God's love never dies, the circle of the wreath has no beginning or end. This reminds us that God's love also never ends. We put lights in our windows or decorate with lights to remind us that Jesus is the light that overcomes the darkness of our world. Another way we remind ourselves of the real meaning of Christmas is by displaying nativity scenes. Last week I asked us to bring in manger scenes to share with each other. We called them Manger Memories. We were asked to write a memory that went with these. One was hand made. Two were the nativity sets from families in which the children could play with them. One belonged to a mother who is deceased. And one was a collection in which a different piece of the Nativity was given to this child each Christmas by the Sunday School until the whole set was completed when she reached the twelfth grade. Our decorations are one way in which Bethlehem can break through our Christmas bedlam? What Christmas decorations do you have in your homes that remind you of the birth of the Savior?

When I was a child we didn't have many Christmas decorations. We had a real tree which sat in the corner of the living room. It was decorated with colored lights, metallic balls covered with glitter, silver aluminum tinsel strewn on each branch to represent icicles, and a star on top. Under the Christmas tree was a paper manger scene. I loved that manger scene. The manger scene was punched out of a booklet, like paper dolls. Then with the tabs fitting together a stable with its manger, the animals, and the nativity characters would appear. I would spend hours in the evenings reenacting the nativity story with these paper people and animals. The only light in the dark living room came from the lighted Christmas tree. Mary and Joseph would make their way around furniture, across the rug, asking occasionally to imagined innkeepers if there was any room for them. When they were offered the stable, I would place the paper baby Jesus in the manger. The field where the shepherds resided with their sheep was the large table in front of the window. The angel would appear to them and then all the paper shepherds and sheep would make their way over the hills of the sofa and across the rug until they found the baby Jesus in the manger. The Wise Man began their journey on the piano. This was located the furthest from the stable. They would see the star on top of the tree and begin their trek around the room, over chairs and tables until they arrived at the manger. Reenacting the Christmas story each year created a type of Bethlehem in my childhood bedlam. Yes, even children can have bedlam at Christmas.

I didn't like Christmas as a child. Everyone in school would get excited about Santa, but Santa didn't come to my house. My parents divorced when I was three years old. From that time until I was eight, I had no contact with my mother. My father was sort of in my life, but he was more focused on his life than on mine. I lived with my grandparents who were products of the Great Depression and World War II. They lived most of their lives on the farm and knew the meaning of working hard, spending little, and saving every penny. When they were children, Christmas was not a major holiday. All they received for Christmas was an orange and some chocolate candy. In the late '50s and early '60s, my grandfather began to witness that commercialism of Christmas was drawing people away from the real meaning of Christmas. So on

Christmas morning there were no presents under the tree. My father would visit some time during the Christmas season, whenever his social calendar permitted, loaded with Christmas presents. As I would open them, a fight would ensue between my grandfather and my father over his promiscuous lifestyle. It always ended with my father leaving the house in a fury.

Years later when my mother entered the picture, Christmas became a competition to see which parent could give the most gifts. Because neither of them knew my sister or me, knew what we liked or disliked, knew what our hobbies were, or knew what we enjoyed doing, the gifts we received were usually not ones we could use or even liked. Each Christmas my spendthrift grandfather would tell my parents that their time would be better spent getting to know their daughters and that their money would be better spent if they put it in a savings account for our future. In the midst of this Christmas chaos, a paper baby Jesus broke through my darkness with his Light. During the evenings in the quiet, dark living room illuminated by the colored Christmas tree lights, reenacting the Christmas story broke through my childhood loneliness and pain. Each evening the paper baby Jesus was born again bringing me hope for a better future, preparing the way for His Grace throughout my life, filling my valleys with His Peace, and freeing me to love like he loves us. Playing with a manger scene under a lighted Christmas tree is one of my favorite memories from my childhood. The Christ Child came to me through a paper baby doll and brought me healing. I think this is one of the reasons I collect and decorate my home with nativity scenes from around the world. They are reminders that Christmas is about our need for a Savior and that at Christmas we receive a Savior.

There is another story I want to share with you about manger scenes. During World War II there was a German prison camp in Algona, Iowa. Thousands of prisoners of war from this camp toiled on farms in the area. When Christmas came, these prisoners began to have memories of Christmases back home with their families. They remembered that they had a Savior so they created for themselves a reminder. They created out of concrete and plaster a half-life sized nativity scene with sixty figures. When the war was over and the prisoners of war were free to go home to Germany, these former prisoners of war gave the nativity to the town of Algona as a symbol of peace and love. The men's group of First United Methodist Church of Algona adopted the nativity scene in 1958. This group of United Methodist Men built a museum to house the nativity. Each Christmas two thousand people visit this nativity and are told the story of the former imprisoned German soldiers. In the midst of war, a nativity scene broke through the hate to bring peace and love, not just to the prisoners, but to those that were their enemies, and now to future generations. Each year those who go to see this nativity are reminded again how Jesus came as our Savior.

These are two examples of Christmas memories. Our memories are a gift from God. Without them we wouldn't know who we are or where we come from. Christmas evokes memories. The smells, sights, tastes, sounds of Christmas remind us yet again that Jesus came from God to save. Christmas reminds us again that God cares. Christmas reminds us again what is really important: love, peace, joy, hope, justice, kindness, compassion, grace, and forgiveness. Christmas reminds us what God is like and what God wants us to be like. Christmas reminds us of what really matters. Christmas reminds us that we need a Savior, to save us from the Scrooge that resides in each of us. Christmas reminds us that we have a Savior. Here is another memory. A US prisoner of war in Vietnam remembers that when death was all around him, when he had no food or dignity, he remembered that he had a Savior. He said that in the midst of his imprisonment, he felt serene and was confident because he knew Jesus was with him. Even if death were to come to him, he was comforted as he remembered the words of Paul to the Romans: Nothing even death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38-39). Christmas evokes powerful memories. What memory do you have that reminds you of our need for a Savior?

Our world today in 2015 needs to be reminded again of the Love that came down to save us, to offer us grace, to give us peace, and to share this Love with us. Every time we show love to another person, no matter what time of the year it is, we are living in the spirit of Christ, sharing our Savior, and keeping the power of Christmas alive.

Reflection Questions: What Christmas memory do you have? How do you share your Christmas memories? How do you share the love of Christ at Christmas and throughout the year?

Resources: *Finding Bethlehem in the Midst of Bedlam* by James Moore

