December 24th, 2019

Springfield Presbyterian Church

Christmas Eve

8pm

A Glorious Scandal

I. Piecing Together the Christmas Story

My friends, what we hear tonight about the Christ child born in a quiet and lowly place is actually a Glorious Scandal. From our reading this evening from the Gospel of Luke, and from what we’ve been taught from our earliest days, is that what we hear tonight is a beautiful story, one with comfort and peace. Everything seems to be going well, there seems to be a hushed sound as the world seems to stop to welcome the this newborn into a broken and fragile society.

And perhaps, for a moment, it is quiet. Yet what we walk into as we hear the Gospel of Luke is peace in the midst of troubling circumstances. As people who study Scripture, it’s hard to put all the puzzle pieces together here. We have four Gospels, one of them, John, stand outside the other three for his use of imagery and poetic descriptions. Our three other Gospels, what we call the synoptic Gospels, have overlapping stories – some are nearly the same, others vary greatly. Most scholars believe Mark was the earliest written Gospel, but it still stands that it was written many years after Jesus was dead and rose again. So, thinking about the culture of their time and our time, again like puzzle pieces, as we sit together this Christmas Eve, we try to make sense out of the story.

II. Scandal!

There are some ideas we can definitely grasp onto tonight. We know that Mary was a young teenager, who carried the Christ child. While the life expectancy was shorter in those days, one might imagine that Mary’s parents were still alive. Yet we never hear about Grandma and Grandpa at that manger stall – we don’t see any figures older than Mary and Joseph on that night. We do not see friends of Mary supporting her during this difficult time and based upon the cultural setting, it wouldn’t be too far fetched to guess that any of Mary’s friends at the time would not stick by her side. Mary herself, reasonably human, asks God not to choose her – and while she submits herself to the calling of carrying the Christ child, she knew that her life would be changed. Later she would have support, the support of her son’s followers, but right in this moment, who did she have to lean on for support? I will say, we do know she has Elizabeth, her cousin, who offers her love and help, but again, this is the only family member we hear about in the Gospels.

And Joseph, a young carpenter, who is ready to leave Mary with her unbelievable story, has to have a major intervention to come to grips with the unbelievable miracle that is taking place. This is the child that is not his child, and while we hear more about Mary later on in the Gospels, we do not hear a great deal about Joseph. We know he was there when Christ was a child, but it would be safe to assume that Joseph died, certainly before Jesus’ days of traveling ministry.

These two young teenagers had a lot to hold, that’s for sure, as they traveled to Bethlehem so they might be accounted for the census. Scholars say they probably travelled around 90 miles, by foot and with animals, carrying all they had with them while Mary was heavily pregnant.

By the time they got to the Inn, one has to wonder – was it really a place of no vacancy? Yes, it would make sense that because it was time for the census that the inn would be fully booked, but one also has to ask – maybe that Innkeeper didn’t want the scandal in his inn. He had the heart enough to find them a place away from the guests. Was the inn full or was his pride rightfully leading him to make a wise business move?

III. This year

It would be easy to hear the common words of Luke fall on our minds and hearts and be filled with a deep sense of comfort and peace, for we have been awaiting for the King to come. Yet, do not be dismayed, this act, this very miracle we are witnessing, is a scandal to the people. So this year, while we celebrate Christ’s birth, I want you to really honor Mary and Joseph. I’m not seeking that you worship them, at all, but I want us all to recognize the difficult story of their lives that they had to grapple with for the Christ child to be born.

This year, be amazed at their bravery, at their willingness to listen to a very hard call and follow it despite the consequences. Appreciate those in your life, perhaps you yourself, who has been called by God to do the extraordinary, and recognize the marvelous challenges and blessings that brings. When you see something that folks consider ‘scandalous’, remember that it was an act of scandal and unusual circumstances that brought this miracle to fruition. Love those who you find on the margins, for Mary and Joseph would be today, and love them brilliantly – offer them hospitality, a meal, a safe space to share hard words. Find peace in the moments that you can, when for a brief moment, the crazy and wild world slows down, and a peace beyond measure lingers mysteriously in the air.

May you find in this stable, in this lowly setting, a glorious miracle and a glorious scandal, that changed and continues to change the way we live today, centuries beyond Christ’s birth. May this glorious story bring you all the hope, peace, joy, and love of Christ in abundance this night and forevermore. Amen.