

The Right Questions

Matthew 1:18-25

Whitefish UMC

Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 19, 2010

- † Driving back to church this week and listening to Annie Gard, the skipper of the *Pea Green Boat* (a children's radio program that comes on every day at 4:00 p.m. during the week), I considered in a new way what it means to be a Christian. Annie shifted the attention of her listeners, children and adults, to Christmas.
- † For about a week, we'd heard poems, stories, and songs celebrating Chanukah, the Jewish festival of light and faithfulness that comes around this time of year. Now it was time for Christmas material. Annie explained the Christmas holiday in this way:
 - † "Christians celebrate the coming of God in the form of a child in Bethlehem, who when he dies becomes for them a savior." Now if you were a visitor from Mars listening to Annie right then, wouldn't you think that was a strange statement? And yet Christmas is such a part of our American culture that we don't even think twice about it.
- † And here we are, this fourth Sunday of Advent, knowing the *answer* that Immanuel, God with us, is very near. For it's almost Christmas (heaven help us, some of us are thinking, including your pastor). But do we ask the *right questions* that bring us to this answer?
- † Watching my new favorite TV show, *The Good Wife*, the other night brought these thoughts to mind. Alicia, the protagonist (and the good wife),

receives a call late one night from the clerk for an Appeals Court judge. (Alicia is a lawyer for a Chicago law firm representing a man on death row, who is scheduled to be executed in nine hours.)

- † The clerk says something like “You’ll be filing an addendum to your appeal, and I want you to know we need it by six o’clock.” Alicia is puzzled, because the firm has had no intention of filing an addendum. She calls her boss, who figures out that the clerk is covertly telling them they have missed something in the appeal that is crucial to their case.
- † And so the rest of the program focuses on their discovering the right questions to ask so they can get to the conclusion that will save their client. What are the right questions that we need to ask as Christmas approaches?
- † Might they be: “Do WE still need a savior?” “What does a savior save us from?” “What does a savior save us for?” You’ve probably had a teacher or a partner (or maybe even a preacher) who answered questions you never even asked. And this might be one of those times. But stop for a moment, and let’s ask these questions together.
- † The angel in today’s story of Joseph and the angel reminds the betrothed of Mary that there was indeed a time when people knew they needed a savior. It was during the time when God’s people had been taken captive in Babylon. They yelled out for deliverance from the exile of those dark times. And so the angel repeats the prophecy of Isaiah: “look the Virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Immanuel.”
- † Immanuel, “with us is God,” would save them from their darkness and oppression. But does an ancient promise, made to a specific group of political exiles and then to another specific group of early Christians, really matter to us here today?

- † This old promise will really matter if we consider our own moments of exile. Of course we see literal exiles on the evening news or the internet, mirrors of those ancient captives. They may live in tents in Haiti or in Palestine or in those trekking into southern Sudan. But we here may experience times of exile, too.
- † Do we feel that we have a meaningful place in the world? Do our lives really matter? Certainly there are some very happy and contented people in this community who believe they have all they need. They have a good income, they love their families, and they enjoy life in general.
- † Do they ever ask, “Why was I created?” “What is the purpose of my being here?” “Where will I go at the end of this life?” Anyone who dares ask these questions knows that we need more from life than contentment. Even the happiest humanist will become restless if they ask “What is my life really all about?” And that is the beginning of knowing why we need a savior.
- † Walter Brueggemann, perhaps the most notable Old Testament scholar alive, writes that “the angel gives Joseph two names for the baby. Names are very important in that ancient world. First, the angel says, "You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people." The Hebrew name Jesus is the verb save. Imagine on Christmas that we have a baby named Save. Many babies in the Old Testament are named Save. It is the word for Joshua, for Isaiah, and for Hosea. Each of them saved Israel, and now Jesus will save.
- † Jesus will save from sin and guilt.
 - Jesus will save from death and destruction.
 - Jesus will save from despair and hopelessness.

- Jesus will save from poverty and sickness and hunger, and in all of the stories of Jesus that the church remembers, it is Jesus who saves.

- † Advent is being ready for the saving one who will come when we cannot save ourselves.
- † The second name that the angel gives for the baby is Emmanuel, God is with us. It is the faith of the church that in Jesus God was decisively present in the world that made everything new. And in the New Testament we have all of that evidence that wherever Jesus came, he showed up where people were in need, and he saved them-lepers, the deaf, the blind, the lame, the hungry, the unclean, even the dead. His very presence makes new life possible, and the church consists in all the people who have been dazzled by the reality of God who has come to be with us in this season of need and of joy, all through this miraculous baby.”
- † But once we start asking the real questions about ourselves, we enter the territory of risk. For the right questions will usually demand that we change. Daniel Harris describes how on a radio talk show, a recovering drug addict told the story about how he began his road to recovery. He had locked himself in his hotel room to take care of his \$600-a-day habit as usual. But this time, something caused him to realize that whenever he turned to chemical substances to achieve a sense of happiness, he went off to be alone. He isolated himself from others.
- † This, he says, is a powerful image of what sin looks like in our lives. Sin is the choice to minister to ourselves rather than allow the savior to minister to us; and often we preclude that divine help by removing ourselves from community. Some people choose to minister to themselves through chemical dependency, others through shopping, gambling, narrow focus on

the acquisition of wealth or things, addiction to work, or other distractions from true meaning.

- † Are we trying to save ourselves in any of these ways? This is a risky question. Can we trust Jesus to truly fill that emptiness that can be within us?
- † Joseph shows us a profound trust in the gospel story. God does not appear to Joseph when he is wide awake and in prayer. There is no physical assurance like a burning bush or parting clouds on a mountaintop. There is only a dream. Are we able to trust dreams?
- † Did you know that when you use marijuana repeatedly, you aren't able to dream? There is a substance in it that prevents you from dreaming at all. If you can dream, do you just dismiss them or even remember them? The dream, though, was enough for Joseph.
- † He had been asking many questions: "What should I do about Mary?" "Dare I go against the law to keep her from harm?" "What does my heart tell me?" And the dream answered these big questions.
- † Walter Brueggemann concludes: "So Matthew prepares us right at the edge of Christmas. He gives us an angel's message in a dream that is beyond our control or expectation. He tells us that it is God's Spirit who makes all things new through this baby, and he names the baby twice. The baby is named Save, and Jesus saves from all that kills and is flat and sad. He names the baby God is with us, and we are not alone.
- † Notice that this story does not ask us to do anything. But I believe it invites us to be dazzled. It invites us to ponder that, while our world feels unsavable, here is the baby named Save. Our world and our lives often feel abandoned, and here is the baby named God with us. So we are to be ready

to have our lives and our world contradicted by this gift from God. We may rest our lives upon the new promise from the angel and we may be safe and we may be whole and made generous because Christmas is coming soon.”

† I want to conclude with this beautiful poem by Jane Kenyon, written in 1993 in Serbia in the winter. It’s appropriate because this last week Richard Holbrook died on the 15th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords, which he tenaciously negotiated to end the war in Bosnia. Let it fill you with anticipation, hope, joy, and love.

† On the domed ceiling God
is thinking:
I made them my joy,
and everything else I created
I made to bless them.
But see what they do!
I know their hearts
and arguments:

† “We’re descended from
Cain. Evil is nothing new,
so what does it matter now
if we shell the infirmary,
and the well where the fearful
and rash alike must
come for water?”

† God thinks Mary into being.
Suspended at the apogee
of the golden dome,
she curls in a brown pod,

and inside her the mind
of Christ, cloaked in blood,
lodges and begins to grow.

† And there it is, the answer to the right questions. Amen.

Sources:

Jane Kenyon, “Mosaic of the Nativity,” in Watch for the Light, 2001.

Walter Brueggemann, “A New World Birthed,” <http://day1.org>

Daniel Harris, “Matthew 1:18-25,” in Feasting on the Word, 2010.