

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, December 27, 2020

A CROSS IN A CRADLE

Luke 2:22-40

A woman tells about a children’s Christmas program she attended “All the songs had been sung, and candles lit. The shepherds had come to peek at the baby and wise men had brought their gifts. The angel had given their message. Then all the cast began to leave...wise men, shepherds and angels.

Only Mary and Joseph and the child remained. Then Joseph turned to go. And Mary, glancing back at the crib, began to follow. But suddenly she turned back, snatched up the baby doll by the foot, clutched it under her arm and left.”

Mary had almost forgotten Jesus. Then, suddenly, she remembered and fiercely clutched Him under her arm. This Sunday after Christmas gives us the last chance to hold the Christ child as well—to reaffirm the truth of Christmas, that is three-fold.

FIRST, GOD ALWAYS KEEPS HIS PROMISES. Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus stayed in Bethlehem for a week. Mary and Joseph were devout Jews who took their religious obligations seriously. When Jesus was only eight days old, they took Him to Jerusalem to the Temple. The custom was for first-born males to be presented to God there. According to their law, the first-born male was sacred to God. An offering was required of either two turtledoves, or two young pigeons. Jesus was to be dedicated according to the Law of Moses.

As Mary and Joseph proudly carried Jesus up the steps of the Temple, they encountered an old man named Simeon, which means, “God hears.” Simeon went to the Temple every day and lived his life in the presence of God. In fact, God led him to the Temple at the exact time when Mary, Joseph and Jesus were entering.

God had promised Simeon that, before he died, he would see the Messiah. So, every day, Simeon went to the Temple looking to receive God’s promise. That particular day, he saw a young couple with a baby. He wondered if this baby might be the one he was waiting for. Simeon asked Mary if he could hold the child.

While Simeon was holding the baby Jesus, the Spirit revealed this was the child he had spent his life waiting for. Simeon began to sing, “Lord, now You may dismiss your servant in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation...” From that moment on, his life would never be the same—for he had seen the Messiah. God always keeps His promises.

But here is the second thing to be said: GOD DOESN'T PROMISE US A ROSE GARDEN. As Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms, the Spirit revealed this was the long-awaited Messiah. He had waited all his life for this moment. This would have been one of those warm Christmas memories that Joseph and Mary would have cherished forever if Simeon had stopped there. He did not. He turned to Mary and uttered a heart-breaking prophecy, “A sword will pierce your own soul...” What could he mean? A sword would pierce Mary's soul?

Once upon a time there was a Christmas play in the most unlikely of places, a maximum-security prison. This prison held the worst possible offenders including, murderers and armed robbers. Prisoners themselves would act out the story for the other prisoners. Since they were in a maximum-security prison, nothing was allowed to be brought in for the play. All the costumes and props had to come from within the prison. A mop was found for Mary to use for hair.

A ski mask with cotton balls glued on socks was used for sheep. In fact, the socks came from four different prisoners. At the prison socks were issued twice a year. No one wanted to give up a whole pair of socks so four prisoners gave up one sock each. The socks were well worn, holey socks that became holy socks in a different way.

A discarded cardboard box was used for the cradle. Everything was falling into place, and the prisoners were excited about the play. Then someone asked a question about the baby. What would they use for the baby Jesus? Of course, a real baby could not be brought in. Someone suggested Mary hold a blanket with nothing inside to represent the baby Jesus. That wouldn't do, the others said, but they were running out of ideas.

On the day of the performance, the chaplain came running into the group of actors. He had found something from his office to use for the baby. So, the show went on. The inmates enjoyed the play, and those taking part found the experience meaningful. Then came the dramatic scene where Mary revealed her baby—the Christ child. She very carefully unwrapped the blanket. The object she was carrying wasn't a baby or a doll

but a cross from the chaplain's office. Suddenly, in that unlikely place, the Gospel message came alive.

What would be a better closing to a Christmas drama than a cross—a cross wrapped in a blanket? There was no rose garden for Jesus. And there is no rose garden for most of us. Authentic Christian faith is not to be confused with rose-colored glasses.

Dr. Isaac Watts was stricken by a fever that left him an invalid. That did not keep him from writing, "Joy to the World, the Lord Is Come." God does not promise things will be easy. There is a cradle in our faith but there is also a cross.

But there is one thing more to be said: THE PROMISES OF GOD ARE TO BE SHARED. We followers of Jesus are heirs to god's promises, but they are not ours alone. They are for the whole wide world. That is why the heart of Christmas is giving gifts.

Mary took her baby back into her arms as Simeon left. So much had happened to Mary and Joseph that they probably didn't know what to expect next. First, there was the visit of the angels telling them unbelievable news and then Jesus was born in a stable. Then there were shepherds to offer their adoration. And finally they encountered an old man who startled them with the revelation that a sword would pierce Mary's soul. What would happen next?

What happened next was an old woman named Anna. Anna had been widowed for many years. She spent all of her time at the Temple, fasting and praying. In all her years, she had not grown bitter and she had never given up hope. There at the Temple, Anna saw Mary and Joseph holding the baby Jesus. At that moment, she came up to the young family and began to praise God. Anna knew in an instant this infant was the one she had spent all her years praying and hoping for.

She did more than just praise God at that moment, however. She began to tell others about God's plan for salvation. Anna spoke words of hope to everyone present because the long-awaited Messiah had finally arrived. She was so filled with joy that she had to tell others about the baby Jesus. Anna knew that God's promises are to be shared—particularly at Christmas. That is what Christmas is all about, after all.

John Ulrich's mother was a social worker who worked with unwed mothers. Over the years, she helped many families. Some of these grateful parents asked if there was anything they could do for her. "Well," she told them, "if you have any good used clean clothes or toys, I'll take them."

John remembers the boxes that appeared in the garage. Each year at Christmas, John's mother would deliver the toys and clothing to her clients. John remembers the Christmas he was nine years old. One day, he passed through the garage and noticed "the most wondrous airplane." The airplane was made of metal and very big, "about three feet long with a three-foot wingspan." Airplanes interested young John. He was sure the plane in his garage just had to be for him. "Surely, my mother would give the treasure to me," he thought. But as Christmas Day approached, his mother delivered the airplane to someone else. "This seemed like the meanest thing a kid's mother could do," John thought at the time. John was very disappointed on Christmas Day when he did not get the airplane.

One day in the spring, John's mother asked him to go along on one of her visits. He and his sisters took turns going on these trips. It was their mother's way of having private time with each of them and also of letting them see another side of life. That day, they visited a family with thirteen children who lived in an old farmhouse. While his mother visited the family, John wandered around by himself. As John turned the corner of a weathered barn, he stopped short. There was his airplane! A little boy was pushing it through the sand, and the grass, and the dirt. Somehow, though, it was all right. Some maturing must have taken place because John was okay about this boy having it.

On their drive home, John's mother never mentioned the airplane. Many years later, John discovered one of the boys in that family became a 747 pilot and another was a military flight instructor. "I like to think receiving that airplane as a Christmas gift was a factor in determining what they did with their lives," John says. He's discovered a simple truth about Christmas. It is to be shared.

A little girl in a Christmas drama reaches back for the doll representing the baby Jesus. She almost forgot Him—just like we sometimes forget Him. But it's not too late. Before we leave the Christmas story for yet another year, let's remember these simple truths: God keeps His promises, though He doesn't promise us a rose garden; and His promises are to be shared.

AMEN!

"S.D.G."