

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2017

Praising, Pondering, and Proceeding
John 1:1-5, 9-14; Luke 2:1-20

Every year, preachers approach Christmas Eve with a little fear and trembling.
How will we preach this most familiar of all the Bible stories in a fresh way?
Is it possible to be original? Is it possible to say something new?
It's a question we preachers ask every Sunday morning about our preaching, actually.
We just ask it with more intensity on Christmas Eve.

You may have heard about the seminarian who asked his seminary professor,
"What should I preach about?"
The wizened old professor paused briefly and then replied,
"Preach about God...
...and preach about 20 minutes!"

I take that as good advice on Christmas Eve, as well.
And perhaps even a bit shy of 20 minutes.

So while the title of this sermon is "Praising, Pondering, and Proceeding,"
we won't start there
because those verbs are about us.
The good news of this night does not begin with us
but with God.

The good news began
long before we donned our Christmas Eve apparel,
long before the tree went into the stand,
and even before the Christmas decorations went on sale at Home Depot...
which means, even before Halloween!
Is it just me, or is it a bit disconcerting
to have Christmas angels standing side by side
with a witch that cackles at me when I walk by?

No, even the retailers cannot get the jump on the good news of Christmas,
because the good news begins with God,
in the beginning — in THE beginning...
...*was the Word,*
and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

*He was in the beginning with God.
All things came into being through him,
and without him not one thing came into being.
What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.*

When we speak of the Incarnation
we think of the Word of God becoming flesh in Jesus.
But the prologue to the Gospel of John proclaims
that the Word was with God in the beginning.
Before the dawn of creation *the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*
And when God spoke the Word, there was light.
When God spoke the Word, life emerged.
That light and life are themselves an incarnational reality.
God is present in the whole creation and has always been.
God has always been with and in the world.
Even before the first sentient being was able to sense God,
before the first human minds were able to conceive of God,
and to know themselves to be in relationship with God,
God was in and with the creation,
and the creation responded.

The psalmist gives voice to this response by calling upon all creation
to give praise to God:

*Make a joyful noise to the LORD, all the earth...
...Let the sea roar, and all that fills it...
...Let the floods clap their hands;
let the hills sing together for joy
at the presence of the Lord...*

And so we have sung on this joyous night...
*Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let heaven and nature sing...
...fields and floods,
rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy!*

If we did not sing praise to God and to his Son
even the stones would shout out their joy at the presence of the Lord.

And so it is that a star in the heavens,
whose light originated millions and perhaps billions of years ago,
but still a created being, still not as far back as the beginning—
a star becomes one of the messengers
of this good news of great joy for all people.

Yes, we are latecomers to this good news,
but we are welcomed to the celebration just the same.

Mary and Joseph must have felt like latecomers when they finally arrived in Bethlehem.
How ill prepared and inadequate they must have felt
to be giving birth to a child
that was to be the Son of the Most High,
the Savior of the World.
What terrible timing it must have seemed to them.

If Joseph had any Type A personality in him at all he must have been a wreck.
If he was a woodworker, then he liked to plan things out
so all the pieces are precisely the right size and fit together well.
Joseph must have been a wreck
as the time for Mary to deliver drew closer.
And yet the birth of Jesus happened exactly as God meant it to,
at exactly the right time, in exactly the right place,
with exactly the right people in attendance.

The Apostle Paul says it was
when the fullness of time had come
that God sent his Son, born of a woman...
Not when time was short,
but when time was full.
This birth was anticipated from the beginning, the very beginning,
when creation first began to sing its song.

And now the Creator of heaven and earth enters creation in a new way.
God comes decisively in the flesh and blood of a human child,
in "another startling, amazing, astonishing act of wonder:
the wonder of the Incarnation!
...God's own reversal,
from being enthroned upon the heavenly cherubim
to being born in a manger.
From being worshipped by the seraphim
to being honored by lowly shepherds."¹

God's own reversal.

And coming in this way,

God upends the hierarchies of the world,
setting in motion the reversal of all our earthly arrangements.
The place to look for the glory of God
is not in the glitz and glamour of human celebrity,
but in the darkness of an out-of-the-way place
with no cameras, no red-carpets, and no awards to be given.
The strength of God is not found in the palace of the Emperor Augustus
with his registration for his new tax policy.
Rather, God's strength is found
in the in the determination of an impoverished woman
to give life to her child,
in her endurance
even as she is bandied about by the world of men.

God, who has always been in and with the world,
comes to us in a new way on this night.
And we cannot experience the wondrous newness of this holy night
and not be changed.
God's fresh start must lead to our own.

And this brings us to Praising, Pondering, and Proceeding.

We hear the Christmas story again and again, year after year,
and while it is always the same story,
it is never quite the same,
because we are never quite the same as the last time we heard it.
I wonder what the Incarnation will mean for you this year?
What will God's fresh start elicit from you this year?

Will you be like the angels, God's messengers,
telling the good news of love come down,
praising God and saying,
*"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*
For the more verbally expressive and emotionally effusive among us,
this will be our response to God's Incarnation.
We will make a joyful noise to the Lord.

Or you may be like Mary,
who finds a quiet center, a place of repose, a calm in the midst of the storm,
in which she deeply ponders what God is doing,
and wonders what it is going to mean for her and for her child,
and what it will mean for the world.
Some of us will be more of this quiet type;
maybe we aren't always quiet,
but this time our response to God's Incarnation
will be to go deep and to ponder.

Or will you be like the shepherds, or perhaps the Magi,
hearing God's messengers, and heeding God's prophets,
you sense the call of the child in the manger,
and proceed to the place where you will meet him.
Will God's incarnation elicit in you a strong impulse to act,
to move in a new direction, to change your plan, to rearrange your life,
to set aside your usual way to go where God is leading you?
Or perhaps, like the Magi, when you meet your Savior
you will go home by another way,
and navigate the politics of our world differently than you had planned,
in order to keep this good news alive.

Yes, it's the same story this Christmas,
but it's far from being the same ol' same ol'.

God's Incarnation is as old as the hills,
it is from the beginning of time,
but it is always new, and it is new once again tonight.
*What has come into being in him was life,
and the life was the light of all people.*

Life goes on.
And the light shines in the darkness.
And the darkness does not overcome it.

The Wonder of wonders is here,
calling for our response.

I wonder what it will mean for you this time?
Don't you?

¹ Bill Brown, in an email to me on December 23, 2017.