

They Seek a Country

For they that seek such things declare plainly that they seek a country.

Hebrews 11:14

The Presidential campaign and election coverage have dominated the news for the past few months. As with any election a portion of the country will be excited about the outcome, while another portion faces a level of disappointment. Both sides hold some degree of hope that their candidate of choice will produce a better country. As Christians we must remember our biblical mandate is to pray for those in authority over us; but it is also important that we never forget that we seek a better country, that is, a heavenly country.

The life of the patriarch Abraham has many spiritual lessons that are applicable to believers' lives. In Genesis 12 Abraham is called out of the land of his nativity to seek a better country that God promised to him. Abraham's native homeland Ur, which would become modern day Iraq, was in his day a prosperous and advanced city in the Fertile Crescent. Steeped in idolatry, Ur with all of its advancements and modern conveniences provided temporal opportunities that were also potential traps for Abraham's walk with the true God. It was from this circumstance that Abraham was called to the land of promise. That land held the fulfillment and contentment of God's purpose.

At the moment, we believers are still dwelling in the land of our nativity, but we like Abraham have the promise of being called to a better country. As we dwell in this strange land, we should do all we can to make our temporary country a better place. We should pray for our leaders and those who are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty. As spiritual darkness continues to invade our land, we have the opportunity and obligation to let our light shine brightly. As we strive to do God's will for our lives, we can experience His purpose and enjoy His blessings while always remembering that we are seeking a heavenly country.

J. Ekis

Blessing

And Joseph brought in Jacob his father, and set him before Pharaoh: and Jacob blessed Pharaoh.

And Jacob blessed Pharaoh, and went out from before Pharaoh.

Genesis 47:7, 10

We are presented here with a paradox, as Jacob the patriarch enters into the presence of the king of the Egyptian empire, quite magnificent in its time, and blesses him. He blesses him both upon introduction as well as departure. One might ask how the parochial leader of a band of seventy persons could bestow blessing upon one of such worldly fame and power.

The concept of blessing often refers to the bestowing of good upon another. However, it can also be used in the sense of ascribing good to another. When God created Adam and Eve in the garden and blessed them, he bestowed good upon them. Yet we also see in the scripture where men bless the Lord God. Men cannot bestow good upon God, but they can by inward and outwardly spoken recognition rightly ascribe God's goodness to Him. It is apparent from our context that the former understanding is intended.

And what good could Jacob bestow upon one who may have been the richest ruler of the world at that time? That ruler may have had little idea of the value of the blessing that he received from Jacob, who had previously been renamed Israel, the prince with God. On the other hand, Pharaoh could have considered the source of Joseph's heritage, who had demonstrated the power and mercy of God to his nation in preserving it from famine. But from the experience of his pilgrimage, which was at least one subject of the conversation between the two men, Jacob understood the value of God's blessing and was willing to freely share it. He evidently further understood his right and duty to share his blessing with this needy potentate.

Although the people of God may be esteemed as having little to offer the rich and powerful of this world, let us remember with Jacob the blessing that we carry with us as His children. According to our Lord and his apostles, we have the opportunity to bless, even when counted as unknown or unworthy, or even when reviled or cursed. So let us be willing to share the blessing of His glorious gospel, of which He has made us ambassadors, with whosoever will hear it.

Rules

Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.

Matthew 7:12

The first part of this statement has been perpetuated in many forms for centuries. It has been commonly called the “golden rule.” It is interesting that in this context Jesus uses it to summarize His previous teaching here in the famous Sermon on the Mount. Through much of this sermon Jesus has condemned hypocritical self-righteousness in its many different expressions, especially among the religious elite. In the most immediate context, the teaching regards the proper application of righteous discernment for the purpose of helping another and not hypocritically condemning another. In other words, if you don’t want to be judged unrighteously, then make sure you judge righteously, which requires self-examination and humility (e.g., Galatians 6:1). Thus, the golden principle stated is a consistent conclusion.

However, Jesus continues in this instance with an addendum, declaring that this rule is an apt summary of all the laws and prophetic commandments of the Old Testament scriptures. In light of that declaration, especially in the company of Jews who should know those scriptures, the honest hearer can do nothing more than stand condemned. Who of them (yea, who of us) could rightly discern either the whole of God’s law or this simple summary and claim to have truly kept it?

Yet there were those Pharisees, who were probably within earshot and were generally revered as holy men by the “common” people, that went about to justify themselves by replacing the precepts of God, as well as this simple summary, with lists of their own rules of the minutest detail. These rules were attainable, at least in their estimation. Yet Jesus has in this sermon exposed many of their self-serving practices as hypocritically empty of any true holiness. Now He simply states a truth that has the power to lead even them to repentance, should they face it honestly. This truth reveals that I am in need of help outside myself, which can only come from God Himself. Hence the open heart repents of self-justifying rule-keeping and instead trusts the only Just One for forgiveness and impartation of His Holy Spirit. He then becomes our only source of power to follow the one rule fulfilled by His nature. Where this is realized, we are free to do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Eternal Words

John 6:68: ...Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life.

William Shakespeare was renowned for the might of his pen. 400 years after his death multitudes continue to ponder his prolific works including 39 plays and 154 sonnets. Many hail him as a transcendent genius—a master wordsmith that employed the perfectly crafted couplet to express his intriguingly, profound thoughts.

Yet for all the effusive praise with which he was lauded, he spurned the notion of being coronated the “Bard of Avon”. In a scene from his most famous tragedy, Hamlet is found contemplatively perusing a book. Polonius asks him what he is reading to which Hamlet sardonically replies “Words! Words! Words!” It was Shakespeare’s wry way of saying that words which are written by men are just that — “words, words, words”. In modern vernacular we might say “blah, blah, blah”.

Was it not the sagacious Solomon that wrote “of making many books there is no end”? Library shelves abound with the musings of philosophers, poets, historians, and dramatists, but the Bible is the only book that can make the claim of divine origination. Embedded in its sacred pages are the answers to man’s most earnest interrogatories. Men’s words are the expression of the finite mind and heart of the writer and so appear trite and vapid. In contrast, God’s word is recondite and vivifying.

Sir Walter Scott, a famed British novelist and poet, was also a committed Christian. On his deathbed Scott is reported to have said to his secretary, “Bring me the Book.” His secretary thought of the thousands of books in Scott’s library and inquired, “Dr. Scott, which book?” “The Book,” replied Scott. “The Bible — the only book for a dying man!” And the committed Christian would have to add that the Bible is not just for a dying man, but it’s the only book for a living man, because it is the Word of God.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

The Desire of All Nations

*And I will shake all nations, and the desire of all nations shall come: and I will fill this house with glory,
saith the LORD of hosts.*

– Haggai 2:7 –

We are all undoubtedly familiar with the text-book definition of “nation.” A nation is a large body of people united by common descent, history, culture, or language, inhabiting a particular territory. To this day, the family and the nation-state remain the fundamental building blocks of world order (which building blocks, incidentally, have been under an escalating assault in our generation by powerful and devilish global forces). The book of Genesis offers us a divine explanation of the birth as well as the purpose of nations.

Genesis 10:32 tells us that after the Flood of Noah’s day, the nations found their origin in the bloodlines of Shem, Ham, and Japheth. We are further informed in Genesis 11 that in the days of Nimrod, a descendent of Ham, despite the familial divisions, mankind was still of a singular language. Due to man’s rebellion at Babel, God added to the merely genealogical distinctions of nations, cementing those divisions linguistically as well as geographically. God’s purpose was one of mercy (Genesis 11:6). The disunion amongst the nations is meant to restrain man from amalgamating in Satanically inspired rebellion against his Creator which would hasten the cataclysmic and decimating wrath of the Almighty. The nations are thus God’s creation, serving to His ultimate purpose for mankind.

Despite the national divisions throughout the millennia, each and every nation, made up of children of Adam, craves the same elusive goals – peace and prosperity. Why are these goals elusive? Because they cannot be obtained in a fallen world. Sin and the curse dictate that in reaching for these ends, nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom. Thus, every nation remains hopelessly imprisoned in a never-ending cyclic pursuit due to the sinful heart of man.

Yet there is coming a day when the Desire of all Nations shall come. He came once already – in the prophesied yet obscure location of Bethlehem of Judea. He was greeted by Wise Men from a distant people, but God’s own nation rejected Him. He is now reaching out to every individual of every nation to assemble to Himself a glorious Bride. When the nations finally blaspheme the work of His Spirit, uniting again in Babel-like rebellion against Heaven, He will shake all nations, destroying His enemies, and ushering in the dawn of a new and eternal Creation. Only at that time will they beat their swords into plowshares, and nation will no longer lift up sword against nation, neither will they learn war anymore.

Come, Desire of Nations, come!

-- D. Murcek

The Name Says It All

And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.

Matthew 1:21

Contained between the front and back cover of the Bible are 66 books, with a total of 1,189 chapters, 31,102 verses, and 783,139 words. It takes an average reader about fifteen minutes a day to read the Bible through in one year. Upon completion, the reader will have been informed with a wide variety of topics and introduced to 3,237 different people. Some of the Bible's truths are easily found while others require a level of diligent searching to uncover some of its hidden gems. Still, with all of its scope and volume there are some verses that summarize the whole Bible in a few words. Matthew 1:21 is one such verse.

In the third chapter of Genesis, we find the record of the problem that would permeate and plague all of creation. Once sin entered the world its effects would be felt through all of history and it is the greatest problem in the world to this very day. Sin manifested in selfishness and rebellion would affect man's relationship with God and also with his fellow man. Throughout all of history there have been great accomplishments, but it is apparent that man is still powerless to resolve the internal and external struggles that infect our world. Man needs to surrender to the fact that a savior is needed. God's remedy for the plight of man would be embodied in the Christ child who was born at the appointed time. His name Jesus reveals who He is and His purpose for coming. Jesus can be interpreted as Jehovah Saves and that is what you have, God in the flesh come to be the Savior of a fallen race. He came into this world to seek and save that which was lost and He is still doing that today. From the woman at the well to Zacchaeus in the tree to all of mankind through the ages to anyone today--Jesus is still the only name under heaven given among men whereby we are saved.

J.

Ekis

Grace and Truth

*For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.
– John 1:17 –*

It has been over two millennia since God intersected with time and humanity in a manger in Bethlehem. His miraculous virgin birth, His unparalleled life and ministry, His sacrificial death, His triumphant resurrection, and His glorious ascension witness to His marvelous Person. He is the Word incarnate, the God-Man, Jesus Christ our Savior. He is our Friend, our Lord, and our God – the singular object of our faith and the ultimate owner of our hearts' dearest affections.

Had Jesus not come, we would have been left with a sufficient yet incomplete revelation of God. "The Law was given by Moses." Dictated by God, written with His finger on tables of stone, it reveals an august and holy Creator. The Law tells us how great God is, and consequently and necessarily, how bad we are as fallen sons and daughters of Adam. His holy standard is unattainable for fallen humanity. James reminds us that if we were to keep the whole Law and yet offend in one point, we are guilty of all. The Law's primary purpose in God's design is not so much to tell us how to live, but rather that it is impossible for us to live in such a way as to please Him. "For I was alive without the law once, but when the commandment came, sin revived, and I died." (Romans 7:9). The Law is thus God's condemnatory agent for the human heart. It tells us how to please God yet immediately reminds us that in our condition we do not possess the capacity to do so.

"But" ... glorious contrasting conjunction! "But grace and truth came by Jesus Christ." God's Law has spoken, "but" He has not left us without means for reconciliation. Holiness is God's demand of us, "but" grace is His heart *toward* us. Sinfulness is our sad state, "but" truth is His standard for us. We are not just condemned by His law, "but" we are also loved by His Son. In Christ, mercy and truth are met together, and righteousness and peace have kissed each other. Jesus came – fulfilling the demands of the Law and upholding the judgement of God, yet simultaneously awakening the human heart and imparting holiness to repentant sinners. He thus validated the righteousness of the Law while implementing the higher standard of grace and truth for all who come to Him by faith.

*Oh to Grace how great a debtor, daily I'm constrained to be
Let Thy goodness, like a fetter, bind my wandering heart to Thee!*

Let us ever and always praise our God that grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.

-- D. Murcek

For good

And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

Romans 8:28

There are times in our life experience when we are challenged to understand how this promise could be accomplished. We know what it doesn't mean. It doesn't mean that nothing bad will ever happen to us. It does mean that God will ultimately work whatever happens into His sovereign plan, and His sovereign plan is good by definition, since He is God. So we can know that what this verse says is true, by faith in the sovereign, holy, true, loving, and good God who called us to Himself.

However, it doesn't say that we will necessarily understand how God will do this. Our faith must simply latch on to this promise and wait for Him to accomplish His purpose in His time and in His way. We can look at our circumstance, or another circumstance about which we pray, and compare it to principles and precepts in scripture that tell us generally what is the perfect will of God. For example, since the scripture commands children to obey their parents, we know that is His will. So we can pray that God will bring that to pass, knowing it is right. Yet our children do not always obey, since there is another part of the equation – the human will. We know that it is generally good for people to be healthy, and we can pray for someone to be healed. Yet we also live in a cursed world, where people also get sick and will eventually die from some cause – another part of the equation. In fact, this promise is surrounded by a context of a creation groaning to be released from the curse, of not knowing what we should pray for, and of things of this life that would try to separate us from the love of God.

Thus, when we pray for things that we know are right and good, and yet it seems that each prayer uttered is answered opposite our desire, we could be tempted to think that this promise is invalid, or worse, that we have done something to invalidate it. This can also be accentuated by accounts of those who saw everything work out in the end. But there is only one condition here, that we are His called ones who love Him. Therefore, we can view this context and see that when our condition is groaning, or all seems against us, and we don't even know if we're praying right, that we can rest in our sovereign Lord and wait, maybe until the eternal other side, for His good work to be complete. "But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." He is all we need.

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Laconicism

*He was in the world, and the world was made by him,
and the world knew him not. John 1:10*

It would be imprudent to accuse the inspired writers of Holy Scripture to be guilty of understatement, yet within this single sentence one would have to admit there are found three profound utterances that cry out for embellishment:

He was in the world: Hidden within this simply stated truth is a doctrine so abstruse that volumes have been penned to attempt to explain its mystery. The immortal, invisible, olamic God has deigned to not only visit the world, but actually partake of the corporeal elements of flesh and blood. "Without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh." Let us not be lulled into complacency by the laconicism, for this holy visitation required a degree of humility that mankind can never appreciate. The infinite becomes finite! "All the fulness of the Godhead, bodily" Colossians 2:9. Perhaps the statement is left in a simple form because of the unfathomableness of its assertion. Now add to this:

and the world was made by him: Fatuous men have invented their chimerical theories of how the world came into existence but must rely on pseudoscience to validate the absurdity of their notions. True science is provable by observation not speculation and since only God was "In the beginning" we are compelled to take His word for it-the world was made by him. Even in its curse-marred state, the world is a testament to the genius of its creator. "Wonders without number" await the earnest seeker whose inquiries must inevitably lead him to the knowledge of the master craftsman that assembled the wondrous elements of time, space, and matter. And yet the ironic reaction is:

and the world knew him not: Here again this understated phrase belies the horror of His rejection resulting in the dolorous agony of the cross and the resultant eternal condemnation that will be meted out at the judgment bar of God for those who "knew him not". "For had they known it, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory." One snowy Christmas Eve in New York City Robert MacGimsey was walking and passed by inebriated patrons in the many noisy nightclubs where the celebration of Christmas had no connection with who Jesus Christ is and why He came. "As an apology to Jesus," MacGimsey wrote :

Sweet little Jesus Boy —
They made you be born in a manger.
Sweet little Holy Child —
Didn't know who You was.
Didn't know You'd come to save us, Lord;
To take our sins away.
Our eyes was blind, we couldn't see,
We didn't know who you was.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Herod's Descent

But when Herod was dead...

– Matthew 2:19 –

Herod “the Great” would likely be an unknown figure in the annals of human history were it not that his reign coincided with the birth of the Savior of the world. Matthew’s account of the birth of our Lord, while recounting the historical events, also provides us with a spiritual case study in unbelief via Herod.

Herod lived a fallacious reality. “Herod the King” (Mt. 2:1). It is true that he had some authority and right, but he was little more than Rome’s figure head. Is this not how every sinner views himself, though? “Ye shall be as God.” The human heart perceives itself a potentate, living out a fragile illusion of power, all the while we are in reality owned by a devilish Caesar – the god of this world.

Herod was presented with opportunity to believe. He heard of Christ from others (Mt. 2:2) The Wise Men brought him word of another King. No doubt God’s mercy was being extended even to this evil man in that embassy. He could have received the news differently – sincerely, hopefully, humbly.

Herod was the beneficiary of a tremendous amount of corroborating witness. It was not just the Wise Men’s word. Herod “went to church”, as it were. The chief priests and scribes opened to him the scriptures, attesting to the Savior’s birth in Bethlehem of Judea (Mt. 2:4-6), reinforcing the profound opportunity God was granting him to humbly welcome a new King into his life.

Yet Herod became diligent for the wrong reason (Mt. 2:7). He would seek this new King in pretense, not in truth. He transformed God’s invitation to “come and worship” into a directive for others to “go and search” (Mt. 2:8). He would neither hazard his security nor abnegate his throne. Pride of heart and lethargy of spirit would cause him to surrender his eternity.

Sadly, Herod’s unbelief would ultimately hurt not only him, but others. When a man willfully rejects God’s grace, he is confirmed in his evil. Herod’s slaughter of the innocents in Bethlehem (Mt. 2:16) would exponentially increase his debt before the throne of the Almighty. To whom much is given, much will be required.

In all of his scheming, Herod was nothing bettered. He went the way of all the earth. He was not as important as he deemed himself. God continued to work, even “when Herod was dead...” (Mt 2:19). Had he received the divine invitation a much happier ending would have been written.

The hearts of all men are of eternal importance to our Lord. He goes to great lengths to reach them. May we be as the Wise Men, telling others upon their fragile thrones of the true King. What they do with the invitation is their responsibility.

-- D. Murcek

Diligent Worship

Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, Saying, Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him.

Matthew 2:1,2

There is some mystery concerning the wise men - exactly where did they come from? how many were there? how did they know to look for the star? Though some things are left to speculation, several things in the text stand out. First, they were truly *wise* men. Wisdom can come in varying types and levels, but true wisdom will cause a person to seek the Lord; which they did. It is the fear of the Lord which is the beginning of wisdom. God is the source of all knowledge and will reward those who seek it. It seems certain that these men were not disappointed at the end of their long journey. Second, they appear to be humble men, for though they were men with a degree of reputation, they were humble enough to seek a newborn child. The Lord hath respect unto the lowly; but the proud He knoweth afar off. These men stand in contrast to the proud and insecure King Herod who couldn't bear the thought of a rival king. The wise men personally searched for the newborn king so they could worship Him, while Herod had others do the searching and certainly for the wrong reason. Thirdly, and most importantly, upon finding Him, they worshipped the child. Their desire to worship Him inspired them to travel hundreds of difficult and dangerous miles, which cost both time and money, for the opportunity to bow before the actual presence of the Lord of Lords. God then speaks to them in a dream warning them not to return to Herod. What occurs in their lives afterward is left to speculation, but certainly being rewarded for their diligent search by being honored to spend time in the presence of the King would forever change their lives.

The same is still true for us today, for we have a continual privilege to bow down and worship the King. At this special time of the year, as we reflect on the entrance of our Savior into the world, let us accept the invitation to come and adore Him.

J. Ekis

Peace on Earth

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, Good will toward men.

Luke 2:14

The Bible prophesies of it, the angels announced it, the virgin born child came to bring it...yet many still struggle to find *peace on earth and good will toward men*. When the angel proclaimed the hopeful message that first Christmas, a peace had already been declared by the ruling Romans; but it was a false peace that was enforced by the sword. The governments of man, though necessary this side of eternity, are extremely deficient because they lack the power to change the hearts of men.

In His first advent, Jesus was lowly and *being found in fashion as a man* he became obedient to death on the cross. The promise of a *peaceful kingdom* will still be fulfilled at His second coming, but first man must be provided with the opportunity to find true *peace within*, which comes by being justified from sin. With Jesus' invitation to come to Him in order to find peace for our souls by entering into a relationship with our Savior, we experience the power of the Gospel releasing us from the clutches of sin and making us a new creation. Love for God and also for our fellow man, and a peaceful contentedness should reflect that change in our lives. Christians *can* experience peace and good will toward men in their individual lives. When coming out of the world, new believers are also able to experience a level of peace and harmony in their fellowship with other believers. But our culture is becoming increasingly more secular, disallowing influences and principles from the Bible and relying instead on carnal knowledge and human intuition, resulting in a world of tension that is devoid of peace. Yet still, God's purpose is for us to experience His peace and to demonstrate that to a world that is in desperate need of it. One by one we can show the power of the Christian witness by the way we interact with each other as believers, hopefully, planting some seeds in those who are searching for true peace.

The peace and good will of the true Spirit of Christmas does not have to be limited to a few weeks in December, but by God's grace can be demonstrated throughout the whole year. Our world is in desperate need of seeing it.

J. Ekis

For Us

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

Luke 2:7

As our world moves farther away from biblical influences, we lose the greatest example of selfless living. Jesus truly is the reason for the season! His life set the standard of selflessness. But as He is extracted from so many aspects of Christmas, the holiday season becomes more self-centered and materialistic leaving many with a feeling of emptiness.

The King of Kings leaving the glories of heaven *for us* should be enough to overwhelm us with a sense of appreciation; but seeing him lying in a manger- a crude feeding trough- should humble us with the realization that *this was for us*. Every step in the life of our Savior, from his lowly entrance into the world to His horrific death and glorious resurrection was *for us*. As we search the scriptures, we will see His example of selflessness over and over. Though He was rich yet for *our sakes* He became poor, that we through His poverty might be made rich. (2Cor. 8:9) For *He hath made Him to be sin for us*, who knew no sin; that *we might be made the righteousness of God in Him*. (2Cor. 5:21) But God commended *His love toward us*, in that, while we were yet sinners, *Christ died for us*. (Romans 5:8) But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who of God is *made unto us wisdom, and righteousness, and sanctification, and redemption*: (1Cor. 1:30) For even *Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us*: (1Cor. 5:7) Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus *shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you*. (2Cor. 4:14) *Christ hath redeemed us* from the curse of the law, being *made a curse for us*: (Gal.3:13) For even hereunto were ye called: because *Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example*, that ye should follow his steps. (1Peter 2:21) But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and *the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin*. Unto *him that loved us, and washed us from our sins in his own blood, and hath made us kings and priests unto God and his Father*; to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen.

Take time today to meditate on these verses. They should inspire us to be more selfless as we remember *all that He did for us*. J. Ekis

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

The Star in the Window

I am the ...the bright and morning star. Revelation 22:16

Our Lord is adorned with a plethora of appellations. Each divine title ascribes to Him a particular characteristic regarding His mission, as well as His eternal character. When the saints gather on the golden shore they will have their choice of any one of hundreds of designations with which to laud the King of Glory. Human imagination fails us in describing that blissful scene when a thousand times ten thousand tongues are lifted in mighty chorus to give Him rightful praise. Our text invites our inspection of this curious name—"the bright and morning star".

Balaam, that enigmatic, ancient sage, was the first to employ the metaphor when he gave this utterance: "I shall see him, but not now: I shall behold him, but not nigh: there shall come a Star out of Jacob". His vision lay dormant for hundreds of years until Isaiah brought those words into sharper focus." Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the LORD is risen upon thee. For, behold, the darkness shall cover the earth, and gross darkness the people: but the LORD shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising." Here the noble visitants rise up in holy pilgrimage to adore the one true king with their path providentially lit by divine luminance. We are persuaded to think that the magi were more astronomers than astrologers. They seemed to understand that the sudden birth of a star signified a corresponding matter of momentous occasion for the inhabitants of the earth. And so it was "When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy."

During World War II it was the custom in the United States for a family who had a son serving in the military to place a blue star in the front window of their home. It reminded all those who passed by that the family within waited prayerfully for the safe return of their beloved son. Sadly, so many of those prayers were disappointed and instead of the anticipated return came the dreaded telegram "we regret to inform you....". The blue star then would be taken down and replaced with a gold star to remind all of the ultimate sacrifice that their son had made to secure the freedom of a grateful people.

That holy, natal night so long ago, in God's celestial window, there hung a star. His Son had entered the battle field to destroy the last enemy and to "bring life and immortality to light through the gospel". And in so doing there now hangs in heaven at God's own right hand, the bright and morning star-the gold star of a finished work and perfect sacrifice that secured the freedom of a grateful people.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Simeon's Example

And, behold, there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon; and the same man was just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him.

– Luke 2:25 –

Some forty days after the birth of Jesus, Mary and Joseph brought the child to the Temple in Jerusalem to be dedicated unto God according to the Law. It is here that Luke introduces us to a faithful servant of Jehovah who we would not otherwise know, but who obviously was known and respected in Heaven. The few verses in Luke's gospel regarding Simeon reveal a remarkable example of faith that we would all do well to strive to pattern.

Simeon's very name means "he that hears". How important is it to truly listen to God! "Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God." (Romans 10:17)

Simeon was just and devout. He was honorable and upright in his dealings with men as well as ardent and honest in his seeking of God. The man was a "twenty-four-seven" believer – he meant it with all his heart.

Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. He had a posture of spirit that believed the promises. It did not matter how long it had been – he knew Messiah was coming and that His arrival was imminent. All of Israel should have been in such a state, but it would appear that Simeon was among a very scant few who actually believed God's promises.

The Holy Ghost was upon him. Oh, that this could be said of every believer! It requires but a heart that wants to be wholly God's.

Simeon had such a personal relationship with the Most High that he received special privileges. The Holy Ghost had revealed to him that he would not see death until he had seen the Lord's Christ. Simeon teaches us that we can be as close to God as we desire – as close as a dear friend. "The secret of the LORD is with the that fear Him; and He will show them His covenant." (Psalm 25:14)

Note that Simeon came "by the Spirit to the Temple." It is good to go to the house of God. But it is useless to do so unless by the Spirit of God. There are many pew occupants every Sunday who have not come "by the Spirit." The worship of God is a sober thing, and only worship in Spirit and in truth is acceptable to God and profitable to the believer.

Simeon was remarkably able to attest, "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people". There were undoubtedly many in the Temple that day. But only Simeon understood that God Himself was present. Because he listened, sought, and waited, God came to Him in a profoundly unique way, rewarding this man for his faithfulness.

Jesus has promised that He is coming. Let us, like Simeon, wait, seek, and listen. The reward for our tenacious faith will be just as unparalleled as it was in Simeon's life.

-- D. Murcek

True Disciples

Then said Jesus to those Jews which believed on him, if ye continue in my word, then are ye my disciples indeed; ~John 8:31

The definition of a disciple is one who is a learner or pupil who usually adheres to the teaching of another. There was a variety of disciples besides the well-known twelve apostles. There were the disciples of John the Baptist. Joseph of Arimathea was also a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews. The Apostle John had the reputation of being the disciple that Jesus loved, and there were many disciples that walked away from Jesus after His teaching on the Bread of Life. There can be different reasons for one to become a disciple, but in today's text Jesus clarifies what it means to be a *true disciple*.

As Jesus began His ministry of teaching and performing miracles, He attracted multitudes of people, most of whom were Jewish. His teachings of forgiveness and a coming kingdom struck chords with those in every walk of life. Though the majority seemed to be common people, He also caught the attention of the rich Zacchaeus, as well as Nicodemus the ruler of the Jews, and even a Gentile centurion. With this broad spectrum of followers, in John chapter 8 Jesus clarifies that true disciples are those who continue in His word. In the parable of the sower, Jesus makes it clear that there would be some who would follow until persecution or the cares of this world became stronger than their desire to continue following Him. In Jesus' teaching on the Bread of Life, He used a *hard saying* to reveal those who were following for the wrong reasons. Some would go away, but others continued to follow because, like Peter, they grasped that Jesus had the words of eternal life. In the parable of the vine and the branches of John 15, Jesus also states that His disciples will bear much fruit. Continuing to learn His word and follow its truth will impact our lives in order that the Lord can work to glorify Himself through us. Spiritual learning and bearing fruit are to continue throughout our lives as we show ourselves to be *true disciples* of our great teacher.

Today is another opportunity to sit at the feet of our master and hear His instructions for us before going out to show the world that we are true disciples. J. Ekis

Wondering and pondering

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

Luke 2:18-19

Although Matthew and Luke give various details that have become well-known to us, the events surrounding and culminating in the miraculous incarnation of the Lord Jesus continue to leave much for wondering and pondering. One of the marks of authenticity of the scriptures is once again displayed in the Christmas account: that if any mortal had determined to make up a fable of how God would reveal Himself to humankind by entering the world, it would not come close to resembling the actual account that is given. Man's natural inclinations for envisioning the ways of God would not allow for such elements in the plan. The secret announcement to the virgin, the shaming of the betrothed couple, the arduous and untimely journey to the birthplace, the poverty of the actual birth, and the heavenly appointment of lowly shepherds as witnesses would no doubt be left out of any man-made story. Yet the actual events that were heralded by the shepherds to those in the Judean countryside around Bethlehem and abroad left them wondering what all this could mean. At the same time, we don't know if anyone went searching to authenticate the story, or if they simply stayed home and wondered – again consistent with human nature.

On the other hand, this young girl holding the child whom the angel had called the Son of God had even more to not only wonder about but to ponder. Her own angelic visitor, Joseph's confirmatory dream, and Elizabeth's testimony and probable recounting of the angelic visit to Zacharias would be the few supernatural communications she had. We see no more details of the plan being provided to her personally to this point. The visits of the shepherds and later the wise men would likewise be confirming, yet remain mysterious. And it is not likely that the past nine months had allowed her to develop a systematic theology. There was much to ponder. The little eyes she now beheld had in some way beheld the glory of eternity. How could it be that this One could be now so tiny and seemingly helpless? Only a heart of faith could be sufficient for pondering these mysteries, as she beheld the reality of what had been told her in the midst of such unexpected circumstances. Let our hearts be as faithful as we again contemplate the wonders of His love.

This day

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

Luke 2:11

This day, upon which all human history turns, was first proclaimed to common shepherds by the angel of the Lord, as he broke into the obscurity of their night in the countryside, shining the glory of the Lord round about them. Leaving others to argue about what exact day that was on the calendar, we can this day pause once again to remember and contemplate the awesome, wondrous, good tidings of great joy given to all people. While in our era this day may be cluttered with situations, activities, or alternatives that could darken souls as much as the night was dark about the shepherds, the power of the light of the gospel tidings is still available to shine into hearts the glory of the Lord through this same message. This day the Savior has been born. He is born unto you. And He is none other than Christ the Lord – Messiah the Master and King, as promised! There could be no other able or worthy to bring salvation from the bondage and darkness of sin for all people.

Whatever our plans may be for this day, let us not allow the very aspects of the observance, which may be traditional or non-traditional, quiet or clamorous, routine or adapting to new circumstances, fully joyful or perhaps tinged with some grief of recent loss, distract us from the focus of the angel's proclamation. Through God's incarnation in Christ we have a solution for our most desperate human problem of personal sin that would prevent peace with our Creator. He who is Lord and Christ became one of us, to reconcile us to Himself through His perfect life, atoning death, and powerful resurrection! On this day, let His unspeakable gift once more focus our hearts to worship Him in spirit and in truth, as we love Him because He first loved us. Blessed Christmas!

Pastors Thoughts of the Week

Wonderful

And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. Luke 2:18

To some extent, wonder is born of incredulity. Mary and Joseph were faced with a crisis of faith. A virgin-born child caused them to wonder "how shall this be?". The angelic announcement was intentionally vague. Miracles defy explanation.

Job extolled the Mighty God "Which doeth great things past finding out; yea, and wonders without number". Awe and wonderment is the commensurate reaction to the handiwork of our great Creator.

We have grown accustomed to the daily parade of miracles that openly manifest themselves before our unimpressed eyes. Alas, familiarity breeds contempt! Is it really so great a leap of faith to embrace the wonders of Christ's birth? The birth of any child is a thing of unfathomable amazement. That from the unseen, microscopic sperm and ovum cells should come forth a fully grown baby within nine months is, in a word, wonderful.

We are all guilty of taking God for granted. Skeptical scientists and philosophers have concocted schemes to explain the inexplicable and in so doing have stripped away the sense of mystery from that which the Lord has intended for the provocation of our faith. Psalms 33:8: Let all the earth fear the LORD: let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. Our minds can only carry us so far in the realms of human comprehension. The unsearchable rest of the matter is left for us to wonder about.

May God grant to each of us that, along with the unquenchable spirit of inquisition latent in the soul of every man, there may also be a spirit of contentment in knowing that many of His ways are past finding out.

Have a blessed week,

Pastor

Faith cometh by hearing: and hearing by the word of God Romans 10:17

Unshakeable

But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy...

– Acts 20:24 –

The cycle of the curse carries us from weakness to weakness. We are born into a cursed world in a weak and needy state. On average, “the days of our years are threescore and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years yet is their strength labour and sorrow...” (Psalm 90:10). We are thus quite prone to insecurity, harm, and detriment both early and late in our lives. Even in our prime, life is filled with uncertainty and potential ills that threaten to encompass and overtake us should our footing slip. Sudden disaster can come upon us in a host of ways, be it as unexpected as a car accident or as unanticipated as a routine physical exam that uncovers some anomaly. And despite the phase of our lives, we are all subject to the instability of nations, to wars and rumors of wars, to the advancing of evil agendas, and to the general sinful progression of mankind.

But all of this need not influence our attitude nor dictate our perspective. For the Christian, no matter what giant we face in the moment, we can boldly assert with Paul that “none of these things move me.” Every believer owns the unshakeable resource of faith. This faith, residing in the inward man, is our governing principle that is renewed day by day (2 Cor. 4:16). The longer we live for the Master and the more we invest in seeking His face, the stronger our faith becomes. As such, we need not perceive ourselves as subject to the whims of fallen men in a fallen world, nor the victims of “chance” or “accident”. Rather, we may rightly and confidently understand our position as securely fastened in the center of the will of our loving and omnipotent Creator.

Our faith is in a resurrected Christ. It therefore cannot be shaken, even by the king of terrors. Over the years, I have been reminded of (and personally strengthened by) the extent of the power of faith in conversations with dying saints. Those conversations with multiple dear friends who were crossing into eternity, while unique in themselves, bear a remarkably similar characteristic. In those moments, while the disease is winning the battle for the body which it has ravaged, preparing to finally silence the heartbeat, the spirit remains indomitable. Faith boldly rises to the occasion and wins the war with the overwhelming desire to behold the face of the One trusted for so long. Such triumphant certainty in those moments are glimpses of eternity and reminders to those of us who remain of the truly unshakeable nature of our faith – that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Romans 8:38-39).

-- D. Murcek

Draw Nigh

Draw nigh unto God, and He will draw nigh to you. Cleanse your hands, ye sinners; and purify your hearts, ye double minded.

James 4:8

One of the characteristics of God that is presented in the scriptures is that of God being omnipresent meaning He is everywhere at the same time. Psalm 139 states: *If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there, if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me.* Here, and in other passages of scripture, we find God is before us, behind us, and all around us. But God doesn't want us to only be close in proximity to Him; He wants us to intimately know Him.

The drawing closer to God spoken of in today's text pertains to our relationship with Him. We can be shoulder to shoulder in a crowd of people and not know any of them by way of relationship. God is intent on being personal and having a close relationship with His children. In the discourse of the Good Shepherd, we see our Lord knowing us by name and sacrificially caring for us by giving His life for us. In other passages the Lord refers to us as friends and also tells us that we can walk in His light and have fellowship with Him. But just as the warmth of earthly relationships can be strained, our closeness to God can also be affected because of sin. To draw closer to Him, we must be cleansed from the sins that beset our relationship with Him. This verse also admonishes us to cleanse our hands and purify our hearts. The cleansing of the hands represents our outward actions and the purifying of the heart speaks of our inward desires, thoughts, and motives. By true confession and repentance, we draw closer to Him and our fellowship can flow unhindered. Retreating to our prayer closet and taking time to read and meditate on His word gives us the opportunity to enjoy the immeasurable benefits of being close to our God.

The promise of today's verse is that if we draw close to Him, He will draw close to us. The door is open today for us to enter and dwell close to our Lord.

J. Ekis

Resolve and the Holy Ghost

For if ye live after the flesh, ye shall die: but if ye through the Spirit do mortify the deeds of the body, ye shall live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, they are the sons of God.

– Romans 8:13-14 –

At the turn of every new year, people all around the world make “resolutions” with regard to things they desire to change about their lives. Some of this is due to guilt while some is borne of a sincere longing for betterment. Whatever the case, we are doubtless all aware, and likely experientially so, of how quickly such resolutions often fall apart within days or weeks.

One of the most faltering things in the universe is the human will. The Apostle Paul himself lamented the pitiable human condition, pining in Romans chapter seven, “for to will is present with me, but how to perform that which is good I find not.” (Rom. 7:18). In other words, we know what we ought to do and can even decide that we are going to execute what is good and right, but when put to the test, our resolve is easily overcome by the slightest temptation and we find ourselves unable to tread the path of change consistently or triumphantly.

While this tendency to relinquish our resolve may be natural, it need not and indeed, should not be characteristic of the Christian. For the child of God, his heart has become the home of the Holy Spirit and his will now finds new vigor and fortitude from this divine Resident. The process of sanctification, which begins the moment we trust Christ and commences only upon our last breath, is one of *constant* change. We are to be continually transformed into the likeness of the One who saved us. Yet this is not a passive metamorphosis. We play an active role in yielding to the leading and prompting of our indwelling Friend. To be clear, our sanctification rests significantly upon two factors – our resolve and the power of the Holy Ghost. It is He who prompts us, leads us, and enables us, for certain. But it is squarely the believer’s responsibility to strive for change as well as to yield to our Helper in order to experience it in lasting fashion.

The old nature within us is constantly rearing its head. It wants to retake the throne of our hearts and re-possess our wills. But it cannot possibly succeed if we yield to the indwelling Spirit. We need not live after the flesh and we must not rest content in our unglorified condition. We have been freed to resolve daily to mortify the deeds of the body and to be conformed to the image of the Son of God. By God’s grace, what a treasure we now possess in these earthen vessels! Let us rejoice that we can be led and changed by the Spirit of God.

-- D. Murcek