

Manage the Inevitable Distractions

Luke 2:1-5

December 20, 2009

Last Sunday I spoke about the importance of keeping a Christ centered focus these days leading up to Christmas. I suggested one way we can do that is by scripture reading. I hope some of you are following my advice and you are reading two (2) chapters in Luke every day.

When we read our bible, there are different approaches we can take. We can read in search of information. What does the bible say about a particular issue? We can also read our bible with the hope of being inspired. We might be feeling down and looking for a spiritual pick me up. Still yet another way to read our bible is with the intention of reading a good story.

Next time you are reading the bible try this technique. Put yourself in the position of one of the persons in the text. What is going on? How is your life being impacted? What difference is this experience going to have upon you life?

We all know the Christmas story. We have read it ourselves or heard it read at church countless times. There is Mary and Joseph, the Shepherd, the Innkeeper, the Wise Men, even Herod.

This morning I would like us to put ourselves in the place of Mary. You are a young woman, probably about 14 years of age. You are engaged to a carpenter named Joseph. You live an ordinary life in a small village of Nazareth.

One day everything all changes! The Angel Gabriel comes to you and tells you that God has a special plan for you. Imagine the fear, confusion, even astonishment Mary felt.

A few days after receiving the news, Mary goes to the hill country of Judea to be with her relative Elizabeth. Why do you suppose she did that? Again, put yourself in Mary's shoes. She is still probably struggling with what this all means. Gabriel told her Elizabeth, her childless relative, is now miraculously pregnant. Spending some time with her will help you reflect on all that God is doing.

It does not say exactly where Elizabeth lived. If you look at a map of Israel at the time of Jesus' birth, it looks to be about 30 to 40 miles from Nazareth to Judea. Mary didn't hop in her Ford Fusion and an hour later she was there, Mary walked.

Walking has a way of helping us think doesn't it?

If we are struggling with something, a good long walk often helps us sort things out and gain perspective. I think Mary must have done some thinking on that long walk to Judea. I say that because Mary seems so clam when she arrives at Elizabeth's.

Let's review the events. As soon as Mary enters the house, Elizabeth greets her. How did she greet Mary? "Welcome, I'm glad you are here, how are your folks? No it says, "Then in a loud voice she said to Mary: God has blessed you more than any other woman! What a greeting! Mary's response is what we call The Magnificat. I invite you to turn to page 199 in the Hymnal and we can read it responsively.

Canticle of Mary
(Magnificat)

Response

The glory of the Lord shall be revealed; all flesh shall see it together.

R My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
who has looked with favor on me, a lowly servant.

From this day all generations shall call me blessed:

the Almighty has done great things for me
and holy is the name of the Lord,
whose mercy is on those who fear God
from generation to generation.

The arm of the Lord is strong,
and has scattered and proud in their conceit.

God has cast down the mighty from their thrones
and lifted up the lowly.

God has filled the hungry with good things
and sent the rich empty away.

God has come to the aid of Israel, the chosen servant,
remembering the promise of mercy,
the promise made to our forebears,
to Abraham and his children for ever. R

It says that Mary spent three (3) months with Elizabeth. She then returned to Nazareth to prepare for her baby. What happened when she arrived in Nazareth we can only guess? Putting our selves in her place, can you imagine the stir she must have created? It may not be such a big deal today for a single woman to have a baby, but in Mary's day it was scandalous.

What would have been Mary's state of mind when all her neighbors and probably family were talking about her, maybe even calling her unpleasant names? What if she told the truth? An angel talked to her, and she is carrying God's Son? Besides calling her a harlot, they would have also called her crazy.

Then there is Joseph. By Jewish Law he could have had Mary killed. That was the punishment to unfaithfulness. Though he decided against that action, he must have been angry and hurt. When we read Matthew's Gospel we see how Joseph was going to quietly break the engagement. But then in a dream, the Lord informed Joseph of what was happening with Mary.

With Joseph on her side Mary endures the scorn of her community and gets ready for the birth. As we know “another fly is put in the ointment”. Augustus, the Roman Emperor, decides to have a census. To be counted everyone had to go to his ancestor’s hometown. Since Joseph was from the house of David, he had to go to Bethlehem.

Having no choice, Joseph and Mary head to Bethlehem. For the 80 plus mile trip they pack up the donkey and start down the trail. There was a movie released several years ago called “The Nativity Story”. It is basically about the birth of Jesus. If you haven’t seen it, it is worth watching. The one part of the movie that stood out for me was the trip Mary and Joseph take to Bethlehem.

I never gave the trip much thought. I knew it was a good distance and it would not have been easy, especially with Mary in her final trimester of pregnancy. The movie shows just how tough, maybe even dangerous that journey was.

So if we are in Mary’s place, we know we are going to give birth to God’s son, we are looking forward to and planning for the day the baby is delivered. Instead of a smooth, uneventful pregnancy, one thing after another comes up. Each incident had the potential of stressing Mary out. Each experience could have turned Mary sour on this whole “Mother of God” thing. As far as we know, she remained calm and steadfast throughout the whole pregnancy.

In a sense Mary was able to stay focused on the wonder of her child despite all the distractions. That example she set can serve as a guide to us as we move through these next two weeks.

I’m sure we are all looking forward to a joyous Christmas spent with loved ones. We hope our Christmas will reflect the sentiments expressed in our Christmas cards. Life however does not always go as planned. There is a chance that something unexpected will come up. Who knows maybe something has already happened to cause a change in the holiday plans.

The goal is to be able to manage these distractions and still have a meaningful Christmas. No, everything may not go as planned, but it doesn’t have to stress us out. I came across a story of a mother who was running furiously from store to store on Christmas Eve, trying to get those last minute gifts. Suddenly she realized she’d lost track of her little 3-year-old son. In a panic, she retraced her steps and found him standing with his little nose pressed flatly against a frosty window. He was gazing at a Manger Scene. When he heard his mother call his name, he turned and shouted in innocent glee: “Look Mommy! It’s JESUS! Baby Jesus is in the hay!”

The harried mom grabbed his arm and jerked him away, snapping, “We don’t have time for all that! Can’t you see that Mommy’s trying to get ready for Christmas?”

As we get ready for Christmas, will we let the inevitable distractions and changes cause us to lose sight of what this season is all about. Will we be overjoyed - **LOOK IT'S BABY JESUS IN THE HAY!** Or will we be overwhelmed - **THANK GOD IT'S OVER!**

Come Christmas Day, following Mary's example, I pray we will be able to keep calm and appreciate the significance of Christmas.