

Gifts for a King
A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented on Sunday, January 3, 2010

Sermon Prayer:

Let us pray. Gracious God, in this season of joy when we celebrate anew the gift of a savior. We pray that your word will come to dwell within our hearts; that word that was born so long ago in a stable that it might find within us a home so that our lives might be grounded and centered upon that one life that has changed not only the world, but the universe. So speak to us this day that we may be equipped to be your people and live as your people. For I ask it in Christ's name, Amen.

Sermon:

When a child is born, the whole world is turned upside down, especially for the family receiving that child. And I have spoken with many over the years who know this reality. Grandparents travel great distances, not only to see the newborn child in their family, but also to lend a hand; to help prepare the home to receive the baby and to help the young parents as they discover the joys and the challenges of parenthood.

I remember bringing our firstborn home and my mother being quite surprised that I was able to change a diaper. She learned something new about me that day. But she was already to jump in and to show me how it was done. It is a good thing when families can come together at such times to offer support and care and to celebrate the gift of a new life to the family and to the world. How difficult and, at times, tragic it must be for families that do not come together at such times. I especially think of single moms who face the challenges of parenthood all alone with little or no support or encouragement. Several years ago I read about a church community that had this reality enter their congregational life.

A young, single mom, who was a member of the congregation, had approached her pastor to have her new born baby baptized. The pastor was very willing to offer the sacrament to this little baby and met with his mother in preparation for the celebration of holy baptism. As the day approached the pastor became very nervous. It was the church's custom that when a child was presented for baptism the pastor would ask, "Who stands with this child?" - parents and grandparents, aunts and uncles, and cousins would rise and stand in a symbolic act of support and care for this new life to their family. For this young mother, however, there was no husband, there was no family, there were no relatives to stand with her as her child was baptized. She presented her child all alone. The pastor was concerned that with no one standing with this young mother it would be embarrassing for her and perhaps even discouraging for her.

The day finally arrived; the pastor called the young, single mom forward with her baby; and in the course of the celebration of the sacrament the question was asked, "Who stands with this child?" as the pastor nervously looked from his hymnal to the mother and the child and to the congregation. The pastor was simply prepared to go on with the liturgy when all of a sudden he heard a noise. Looking up he was surprised, pleasantly surprised to see members of the congregation slowly standing to their feet. The whole church, the entire community of faith was standing with this young mother and her baby in an act of support, care and celebration.

Quite frankly, whenever we celebrate a baptism in this sanctuary that is what we as a congregation do when we respond to what the parents and grandparents and godparents have promised in the course of that service. We promise to stand with each child that is presented for baptism, and each child's family. But that day in that church the sacrament of baptism was transformed into a living reality of a congregation that was willing to stand on its feet in support of a young mother and her little baby boy.

Today, we are reminded of those who stood with Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus following his birth. We are reminded of the shepherds who came in from the fields. And shepherds were a motley crew; they were in some respects social outcasts; they were ruffians, people who lived on the land and lived away from civilization. They were the least likely one would expect to visit with someone who was born as the savior of the world. But the shepherds at the bidding of the angels came to Bethlehem to stand with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.

And now today we hear of other visitors that come from a far distance, a far away land. Probably speaking languages that Mary and Joseph had never heard before; these strange visitors from the East who came to Bethlehem after seeing the vision of a star; they came on camels and they came bearing gifts. These were the ones who came to stand with Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.

. There were no family members, there was no community of faith, just these strangers who came to stand with this young family in an act of support, care, celebration and devotion. The gifts which the wise men brought were gifts fit for a king. Gold, the most precious of metals shining bright yellow as the burning sun; Gold that would be used by many kings to fashion a crown and to establish wealth in the kingdom; Frankincense, the incense burned by the priests of Israel at the entrance to the holy of holies, the place of God's judgment seat; Frankincense, reminding those who would be king that they are to execute God's justice in their reign; and Myrrh the ointment used at the anointing of a king, the ointment that was placed upon the head and the beard and the garments of the newly crowned king by the priests. Gifts fit for a king presented to a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem, a small city that sat in the shadows of the capital city of Jerusalem. Strange visitors presenting strange gifts to a baby born without a home, without a community of faith, without a family other than a mother and father to care for it, to welcome it into the world.

In the words of Christina G. Rossetti, found in the hymn "In the Bleak Midwinter" we hear an invitation. Rossetti writes, "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a Wise Man, I would do my part; yet what I can I give him: give my heart."

Christ is born and with his birth is the birth of the salvation of humanity. He is born to a young couple, in a strange town, under strange circumstances in odd surroundings and with questionable visitors. Perhaps the question that comes to us this day is like that question that pastor asked of his congregation when that young single mom presented her child for baptism. "Christ is born, who stands with this child?" Do you?

Today as we enter into a new year, I thought it'd be fitting for us to show that indeed we as a congregation do stand with this child by reaffirming our baptismal covenant. And so I would invite you to turn in your hymnals to pages 50-53 and let us together reaffirm the baptismal covenant that we all received that part of our coming into the community of faith.

Baptismal Covenant:

Brothers and sisters in Christ through the sacrament of baptism we are initiated into Christ's holy church. We have been incorporated into God's mighty acts of salvation and given new birth through water and the Spirit. All this is God's gift, offered to us without price. Through the reaffirmation of our faith, we renew the covenant declared at our baptism, acknowledge what God is doing for us, and affirm our commitment to Christ's holy Church.

And I ask will you please stand with the Christ child:

On behalf of the whole Church, I ask you:

Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness,
reject the evil powers of this world,
and repent of your sin?

I do.

Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you
to resist evil, injustice, and oppression
in whatever forms they present themselves?

I do.

Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior,
put your whole trust in his grace,
and promise to serve him as your Lord,
in union with the Church which Christ has opened
to people of all ages, nations, and races?

I do.

According to the grace given to you,
will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church
and serve as Christ's representatives in the world?

I will.

Let us join together in professing the Christian faith
as contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments.

Do you believe in God the Father?

**I believe in God, the Father Almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.**

Do you believe in Jesus Christ?

**I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
[who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to the dead.
On the third day he rose again;
he ascended into heaven,**

**is seated at the right hand of the Father,
and will come again to judge the living and the dead.]**

Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?

**I believe in the Holy Spirit,
[the holy catholic church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting.]**

Please turn to page 52: reaffirmation of faith.

My brothers and sisters in Christ,
remember your baptism and be thankful. **Amen.**

The Holy Spirit work within you,
that having been born through water and the Spirit,
you may continue to live as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Let us rejoice in the faithfulness of our covenant God.

We give thanks for all that God has already given us.

**As members of the body of Christ
and in this congregation
of The United Methodist Church,
we will faithfully to participate
in the ministries of the Church
by our prayers, our presence,
our gifts, and our service,
that in everything God may be glorified
through Jesus Christ.**

The God of all grace,
who has called us to eternal glory in Christ,
establish and strengthen you
by the power of the Holy Spirit,
that you may live in grace and peace.