

Jesus came first with **gentle sign**, and so he still comes. A young, working-class couple welcomes their first child in a stable. No pomp, no fine furnishings, no media coverage. Just the quiet rustle of animals, the familiar human sounds heard at any birth, and the cry of a new baby who was laid in a manger. Here was God's gentle sign of incarnate love.

Jesus called for gentle ways among his followers, nowhere more memorable than when he counseled them: *If any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also...Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you* (Matt. 5:39, 44). He also told them: *Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth...Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy* (Matt. 5:5, 7). The world, of course, argues otherwise. We live in a day when aggressive and assertive ways are praised, while meekness and mercy are ridiculed.

It was no different in Jesus' own day. Around the time of Jesus' birth the world looked to strong, ruthless, merciless, powerful leaders: King Herod in Jerusalem, the Governor Quirinius in Syria, and the Emperor Caesar Augustus in Rome. The world did not think to look to a poor couple swaddling their son in a Bethlehem stable. Yet that is where God chose to send this gentle sign of love.

We need a gentle sign that seeks our best and deepest response while at the same time one that affirms our worth regardless of our response. So God, in a quiet, gentle way, "came down the backstairs at Bethlehem, lest [God] blind us by excess of light" (George Buttrick). And this small town, Bethlehem, was where a child was born who would beckon and enable, save and restore through the power of love. Still today Jesus comes in ways that the world deems powerless and ineffective. He comes in unheralded, unnoticed ways that do not make the front page of the newspaper of the 10-o'clock news, but in ways that leave his indelible mark on the lives of persons who welcome and receive him. In those who say 'yes' to his presence, a Christ-like spirit is born, which soon becomes quiet human deeds of constancy and gentle strength.

Jesus also came as a **lowly sign**, and still comes where people admit their need and their limitations, where there is an underlying sense that whatever power or gifts they may have are not so much in them, as through them. Jesus reminded his followers: *Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted* (Matt. 23:12). He also told the disciples: *You know that those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all* (Mark 10:42-44).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus encapsulated this teaching by saying, *Blessed are the poor in spirit* (Matt. 5:3), which might be translated "Blessed are the humble-hearted." Jesus also taught that *the first will be last, and the last first* (Matt. 19:30).

But Jesus' teachings and his spirit are often disdained today by a world that treats privilege, position, and self-aggrandizement as the authentic measure of greatness and power; that overuses the superlative to define importance; that still is particular about rank and order, status and prominence. Most of us would not appreciate being characterized as humble or meek and we'd take objection to being a servant to anyone, because we believe the world's view of things.

But what we need, in truth, is the humble-minded, unpretentious, God-centered life that Jesus lived and to which he summons us. We need his lowly sign that awakens our goodness, restores our true dimension, and moves us toward community, responsibility, and reverence for God. We need a sign that draws near with the contagion of inspiration and influence that rouses and points us to claim wholeness and a life that is fit for living, fit for dying, and fit for a destiny beyond both.

God gave us a sign when Jesus took upon himself the form of a **servant**. Jesus, whose first cradle was a cow's eating trough, said that

he came not to be served, but to serve. Whether taking children on his knee, placing his hands on the unseeing eyes of the blind or the numb legs of the paralyzed, feeding the hungry, listening to the wistful yearnings of the powerful and wealthy; whether drawing near the tormented or kneeling before his disciples to wash their feet, the love in his humble ways revealed God's kingdom and transformed lives.

Jesus challenged his followers then, as he challenges us now, to gentle, humble servanthood. His ways are so simple. His spirit is so liberating. His strength and power are so direct and yet so reticent. His life showed no mock heroics but instead was a life which is once and for all what life is all about, what God created it to be.

The wealth of empire, the strength of conquering armies, celebrity status, and triumphal arches, winning by intimidation, and elbowing our way to the top – these are the measure of our humanity, the mark of greatness in a world gone awry. But the sign of God's Kingdom, the sign for all times, is in a stable where a child is born whose name is Jesus, who took the form of a servant to reveal the love that saves us and keeps us.

Prayer: God of Hope, the sounds of Advent stir a longing in your people. They reach us in the midst of our routines where we hurry big for little reasons. We hear them even as we give safe answers to questions we do not care to ask. Crumble our walls and make a place in our lives for the freshness of your love, that is well-lived in Jesus Christ and still given to all who confess their need and dare to respond to your Holy Presence. Amen.

Source: Donald J. Shelby. *The Unsettling Season: Advent-Christmas-Epiphany*. Upper Room Books: Nashville, TN. 1989. Pgs. 63-78.

How Jesus Came – and Comes!

Sunday, December 21, 2014

The Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Isaiah 9:2-7 and Luke 2:1-20

We like to be dazzled and entertained, especially at Christmas. We like to have our senses galvanized with spectacle and pageants. We're attracted to shiny things, moving images, and pretty colors. Madison Avenue knows this, which is why marketing experts can shape public opinion by presenting images that are believable and sellable.

I often wonder why God didn't use a few special effects on the night Jesus was born? I know there was a brilliant star in the heavens, but not many people knew why or for whom it was there. I know there was a choir of angels, but only a few poor shepherds heard them. Why didn't God let loose a miracle or two like those that occurred at the dawn of creation, or with Noah and the flood, or with Moses at the burning bush, or with the Israelites at the Red Sea? Not even Hollywood could beat that!

I also wonder why God didn't choose Athens or Rome or Alexandria or Jerusalem as the location for Jesus' birth? Why not choose a place with more people to maximize the exposure? Why did God choose a stable as the setting? It's not a very believable place for the birth of the world's Savior or for the turning point in humankind's spiritual quest.

When the prophet Isaiah announced the coming of the Messiah King, he added the promise that the child would sit in royal splendor on David's throne. Now that sounds impressive! Yet the actual birth of Jesus surprises us by its inconspicuous setting, its simplicity, and its modesty. But it is this very underwhelming appearance that reveals how Jesus comes today into the midst of our lives, in our time, and in our town.