

Sermon: "The Hand Print of God"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
12/21/03
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

A CHARLIE BROWN CHRISTMAS

One of my favorite "classic" Christmas shows is the cartoon featuring characters from the comic strip, Peanuts. I think the name of that special was something like "It's a Charlie Brown Christmas." At any rate, Charles Schultz, with his characteristic gentle humor, explores the joys and trials of the holiday season.

Like real life people, these cartoon kids are caught up in the rush of the season. And in the end, Charlie Brown cries out in anguish, "Can someone please tell me the true meaning of Christmas?"

At this point, Linus and his blanket take center stage. The little boy repeats the story of Christmas word for word as it is recorded in the Bible ... about how the shepherds saw the glory of the Lord and about the promise of a Savior. Then Linus said something like, "That's the true meaning of Christmas Charlie Brown."

End of show. Very effective.
One of the most popular Christmas specials of all time.

Last year there was a documentary on the making of that famous Christmas special. One person said that the show almost wasn't made. The executives at CBS didn't want to include Linus's speech at the end of the show. But, Schultz insisted on keeping it. If they took out the speech, he said that there would be no show.

Schultz prevailed, and the rest is TV history.

A STRANGE STORY

Of course, I can understand why the executives at CBS might have wanted to eliminate the real Christmas story. The story of the birth of Jesus does seem out of place in the season of merry making that we call Christmas.

If the story of Jesus' birth is the real meaning of Christmas, it's a strange story when compared to the other stories we know. It doesn't seem to fit our preconceived notions of what is real and possible.

The glory of the Lord shining around a newborn child? The will of God being worked out through a poor family in an insignificant village on the backwaters of history? Our common sense tells us that such a thing seems highly unlikely.

Surely there must be more to the story than this?
Surely there must be more to Christmas than just this strange tale of one whose birthing room was a stable. The modern world has been happy to embellish on the story and add other stories.

And yet the story of the Christ child is the original story of Christmas. We believe that God was in Christ. This is the "reason for the season" as the old saying goes.

AN "IMPOSSIBLE" STORY

But, sometimes I think that even those of us who are Christian fail to grasp just how difficult, how revolutionary the message of Christmas can be. The story of Jesus breaks all the "rules" of life as we know them.

An angel appears to a young girl, a virgin and tells her that she is going to have a child. Her response? The same one that we would have I dare say. "Say what? What do you mean? How can this be? I know better than that. That's impossible."

But, the angel Gabriel had an answer for Mary. He said, "Nothing is impossible with God."

This was to be a special time, a unique time in the history of the world. This was a time when all the rules would be broken and not just the rules of childbirth. God's hidden glory would finally be revealed not in halls of power nor in the homes of the rich but in the birth of a poor young girl's baby.

In Jesus Christ, God became flesh and dwelt among us. A world that had so long been estranged from God would now find God in, of all places, the touch of human hand.

Once I got a Christmas card with a picture of a little hand reaching up out of a straw manger. The caption read, "Christmas is love tugging men and women back to God with the powerful clasp of a tiny hand reaching from a bed of straw."

Many of us know what it is like to have our lives changed by the tug of that tiny hand. But, can we believe the tiny hand is also the hand of God? That is more difficult to believe.

Sometimes we are like Mary.

We have a hard time believing that a virgin could conceive and bear a child. We're not so sure that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of all creation can come into the world in a new way. We believe that there is a great gulf between that which is human and that which is divine. We think that things will always be the same, that the intervention of God into the lives of men and women is just a pipe dream.

THE MEANING OF THE MIRACLE

In a way, the virgin birth is the easy miracle to believe in. The hard thing to believe in is the meaning of that miracle ... that (as one commentator put it) "the poor are royalty, the rich are in big trouble, [and] that God not nations rules the world, ..." (Luke 1:46-55)

That's what Mary believed this special birth was all about. She sang about it in the song which follows our lesson for today. It's known as the Magnificat and it's more like a protest song than a Christmas carol.

Sweet little Mary is singing a protest song about how things are going to change. She sang, "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty." Luke 1:52-53

You may not like the message. You may not believe the message. But, one thing is sure. This is the message of Christmas. The gap between what is holy and what is human has been bridged by God.

The glory of the Lord does indeed shine in what seems like to us the darkest and most unlikely of places. The world as we know it will never be the same because Jesus Christ was born of Mary. His kingdom will know no end, and it is a kingdom based upon love and justice.

CHANGED BY A HUMAN HAND PRINT

That sounds like a mighty big claim, but you know, it's amazing how one experience can change everything in a human life. This past week as I huffed and puffed on my exercise bike, I watched an interview with Oprah Winfrey on ABC's Good Morning America.

Money was scarce in Oprah's house when she was growing up, and one Christmas her mom had to tell the children that she wouldn't be able to buy Christmas presents that year. Her mom was ashamed, and Oprah said that as she felt ashamed for her mom that night.

But, through the generous donation of an outsider, they were able to have presents after all. Oprah said that experience touched her very deeply, and when, as an adult, she heard about children in South Africa who were suffering because their parents had died due to the AIDS epidemic, Oprah decided to use her considerable monetary resources to bring presents to the orphaned children in that country.

While in Africa on this mission, Oprah was deeply moved by the story of a 15 year old girl who was taking care of a younger brother and sister. Both parents had died of AIDS which, by the way, in Africa kills 64 people every minute. This little girl asked Oprah if she could possibly help her with the six dollars needed to buy a school uniform which was required if she was to attend school.

Of course she was happy to do it, but that also got the talk show host to thinking. She said that she saw herself reflected in the lives of these young South Africans. She knew from her own experience that what these children really needed was an education so they could make it out of the vicious cycle of poverty that had engulfed their lives. So, she decided to invest millions of dollars of her own money to create a foundation to help in the education of these orphans.

Oprah said that she believes when we reach out to someone in compassion, that we make a "hand print" on that person's life ... that is, we change the course of their lives in such a way that many others are also affected in a positive way down the line. I think that we see the truth of that statement in her own life and in the lives of people who have touched us and helped us at a significant time in our journey.

THE HUMAN HAND PRINT OF GOD

And I think that the same thing is true in a much greater way when we talk about the life of Jesus. In the life of Jesus, the world was touched by a hand a hand that was at the same time the hand of a righteous human being and the hand of God. Using Oprah's analogy, we could say that Jesus made a "hand print" on the world that continues to change things even today.

I think this is the message of Christmas.
Jesus is God's human hand print on the life of the world.

The story about Jesus' birth wasn't the first story to be remembered or written by the early Christians. People didn't believe in Jesus because he was born in an unusual way. The shepherds got just a brief glimpse of the glory of the Lord, and it scared them out of their wits. Though they praised God for what they saw, I'm sure they didn't understand why the birth of this child was so special.

It was only after the life, death and resurrection of the man Jesus that people began to understand the full import of what had happened. It was only after the resurrection of Jesus that the special circumstances of his birth began to make sense.

And, in the same way, I think that we can only understand the true meaning of Christmas if we view it through the lens of Easter and the world changing power of the resurrection.

MARY'S SONG

In Mary's song she tells of her Savior who has "looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant." The Greek behind our English word, "lowliness" is not talking simply about humility, but about poverty.

Mary is poor -- dirt poor. She is poor and pregnant and unmarried. She is in a mess. But she sings!

Why? Because Luke knows -- from the vantage of the end -- that this lowly one, this wretched one, this woman, God raises up. Mary, despised and rejected, is favored by God and will bring the Messiah to birth. And so, she sings.

Christmas is not a benign little tale about the birth of a baby and the hope of new life. It is not a warm, fuzzy celebration of the familiar. Christmas is the intrusion of God into human life in such a way that all our assumptions are challenged. Christmas is about the hand print of God on human history. Christmas is a story that changes all our stories forever.

THE IMPORTANT STORY

Every year at Christmas I look forward to getting a newsletter from a group called Jubilee Partners. They are a Christian community who, among other things, helps refugees adapt to life in the United States. In the middle of a dark and dangerous world, they have many stories of courage and hope to tell.

This fall two members of that community, Don and Carolyn Mosely, were leading a work crew building homes in Egypt and Jordan. While they were working in Jordan, Israeli planes which were going to attack Syria passed over their work site. Don reported that, as you might expect, there were many signs of tension in the region. But, true to his vibrant Christian faith, Don would not accept that tension as his final judgment on that troubled part of the world.

He wrote,

"And yet we have hopeful stories to share with you. Those who sit in places of political power or those who sit mesmerized by the latest hype and hysteria on CNN might dismiss these stories as irrelevant.

We suspect the same people would have dismissed the birth of that child in the stable in Bethlehem as irrelevant and placed their bets instead on the military power of the Romans.

Glued to their TV sets, they would have been utterly unaware of the star in the East, the tidings of great joy, the profound good news that God's love is greater than the worst humans can do. They would have missed the call to become active players in the greatest and most hopeful drama of all."

BELIEF IN BAD TIMES

Jesus was born in a world like ours, in fact, in a world even worse than ours. It was a world in which tyranny ruled everywhere, and poverty and hunger and suffering was overwhelming for all but a very few.

When you look at the time of Jesus realistically you might easily think that it was the height of foolishness for Mary to sing for joy to God as she did. What was there for her to celebrate but some strange dream, some vision, and a pregnancy that had almost led to her being rejected by her fiancée?

The times were bad, and everyone knew that they were going to get worse. This was as plain to see as Caesar's armies and Herod's tax-collectors, and the crosses that so often appeared along the roads and highways.

What was there to celebrate in Judea 2000 years ago? How could Mary have the audacity to believe that her little life could be of an significance in a world like that?

I don't know about you, but sometimes I feel discouraged because my story seems ... well so small. What difference does it make that I have served in this place? Who will remember in a few years? Is there any significance to what we do each day or are we just caught up in the swirl of events beyond our control?

BELIEVING IN GOD MORE THAN THE TIMES

I think Mary's story teaches us that there is significance to our lives all our lives. Mary was told by God that her life would make a difference, and it was confirmed by the joy of Elizabeth and her unborn baby.

You see, Elizabeth and Mary believed in the power of God. They had faith in God's plan for their lives. At that point in time they certainly couldn't understand how it would all work out, but they believed that because they were blessed by God, it would work out some way somehow. And so they rejoiced. They praised God.

I think that this is what we are called to believe as well. As Christ was born in Bethlehem long ago, so hope and joy can come anew to our lives in this special season.

Through the power of God's Spirit, we too can be filled with joy inside.

We too can (as the apostle Paul put it so many times in his letters) be "in Christ."
We too can see beyond the circumstances of our life to embrace a hope that is above our wildest expectations. We too are encouraged to believe that no act of kindness is insignificant, that no story is too small to tell that this world, as wide and as troubled as it is, is still God's world ... cherished and loved by Him.

I know.

It's hard to believe something like that.

It's hard to believe that God was in Christ.

It's even harder to believe that the Spirit of Christ is with us and in us this very day.

But, that is the message of Christmas.

We Christians are called to believe the hard things.

We Christians are called to proclaim the hard things that many cannot accept or see.

I wonder. Will we hear the joyful song of Mary this year?
Are we humble enough to be lifted up? Are we hungry enough to be fed? Can we feel the salvation of God in the baby yet to be born?

I believe that God still invades our lives in the darkest places and in the most unlikely of ways. I wonder. How might God come to us this Christmas?

May we be open and ready for that Presence to come among us once again. May we rejoice as God once again touches us.

Amen.

Sermon: "The Lord is Near"

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THE ANXIOUS SEASON

This is indeed the season of expectation and joy.
Some of us expect good days ahead as we visit with family and friends.

But, it is also a season of remarkable anxiety. Some of us expect some not so good days as negative feelings and concerns weigh down our hearts.

This is the season when long standing troubles with family members are often highlighted once again. This is the season when sadness turns into depression. This is the season when trying to buy that \$29 DVD player at Wal-Mart can land you in the hospital trampled by a herd of shoppers seeking the nirvana of a blue light special.

This year in particular we are all concerned about soldiers and sailors who are spending Christmas in a place that is far away and very dangerous. We live in a world that seems far less stable and much more divisive than in recent years.

Sometimes I wonder if it would be better to side with old Scrooge and cut back on our expressions of joy and wishes of a merry Christmas not because I approve of his "bah-humbug" approach to the season, but because I am worried about those of us who find the expressions of joy a pain instead of a promise.

Think of what it would be like to be filled with anxiety about the future.
Think of what it would be like to be all alone ... just hoping to make it through the holidays. Many of you don't have to think. You know. For those in this situation, a cheery "Merry Christmas" just serves as a painful reminder of how difficult things are this year

There are so many who seem so happy and joyful. There are so many whose life seems smooth and secure. But, for the one whose life is not going well, joy itself seems to have taken a holiday. Joy is a two edged sword. For many joy, at least this year, is not a promise but an impossible dream.

PROCLAIMING JOY TO AN ANXIOUS WORLD

But, in the face of it all, we Christians still proclaim joy. Each year, no matter what is going on in our world, the Christmas message is the same. "Joy to the world. The Lord has come." Or as Paul puts it in our lesson for today, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." Philippians 4:4-5

The contrast between what we proclaim and what we find in the world and in our lives is striking. Gentleness? Joy? We cannot help but notice that there is precious little of that to go around this year. Doesn't seem to be much peace on earth and good will toward men or women.

At lunch last week some friends were talking about how polarized our country had become politically. Someone said that it is worse now than he had ever seen it. But, some of us who remembered the Vietnam war years said, "Oh no. You've forgotten how bad things can get. It was much worse during those days."

I am reminded of a song that played on the radio during that time period. It was a version of Silent Night which was interrupted periodically by the terrible news flashes of the day stories of atrocities committed during the war stories of prejudice and the struggle for civil rights stories of riots and murder and mayhem.

And all the while the sweet song of Bethlehem continued "Silent night, holy night ... sleep in heavenly peace. Sleep in heavenly peace." Even my friends who did not believe were impressed by that song. It made us think. It expressed the contrast between a season which celebrated the Prince of Peace with a world that was anything but peaceful.

Today many of us find ourselves in a similar situation. This is a season when we talk about the Prince of Peace, but the world is filled with precious little peace. What do we do with the profound contrast between what many of us feel and what Paul seems to command in our lesson for today?

HOW CAN THIS BE?

Rejoice in the Lord always? Come on Paul. Always? I can understand rejoicing most of the time, but there are some times when rejoicing just doesn't seem to be the right thing to do. But, that's exactly what he says. There is no word study that I can do to help us escape the implication of this passage. Always means always on all occasions ... continually forever in every instance with no exception. So much for using my technical biblical training to make the text a little easier to take!

I am reminded of Mary's astonishment when she was told by the angel that she was going to bear God's Son. She asked, "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked the same question when he was told that salvation in God's kingdom would be due to the miraculous intervention of God's Spirit a birth from above. "How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

And I would ask the same question this Sunday, this Sunday in Advent that we call Joy Sunday. How can this be? How can we rejoice always?

That certainly does not describe my life. I can approach a day determined to "rejoice" and before lunch I have already failed miserably. As it was for Mary and Nicodemus, God's word for today does not match my experience of life. How can we proclaim peace and joy when there is no peace and joy in our lives or in our world?

NOT PEACEFUL FOR PAUL EITHER

In order to understand what the apostle Paul meant when he talked about rejoicing in the Lord always, I think we need to understand what was going on in his life when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. As a seminary professor used to tell me, "When we read the letters of Paul, we need to remember that we're reading someone else's mail!"

Before the letter to the Philippians became a part of Holy Scripture it was, as the title puts it, a letter. And so it is only logical to conclude that our interpretation of the letter to the Philippians should be informed by the historical circumstances that surrounded the writing of this letter. We need to know as much as we can about the apostle Paul and the people who received this letter.

Now, we don't know all that was going on in their lives at this time, but the letter itself gives us some insight. First of all, Paul wrote this letter from prison. Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel, and there are indications that many of the Philippians also were experiencing persecution and imprisonment for their faith as well.

More than that, there seems to have been some kind of discord brewing in the church. Paul was justifiably proud of the church at Philippi. It was one of the few churches that seemed to really be living the faith. But, even in this church there was conflict.

Two leading women in the church at Philippi have been fighting. They are notable figures and their feud might well have caused irreparable damage to the church. Earlier in this same chapter Paul talked about the fact that these two women were leaders in the church. They had "struggled" beside Paul in the work of the gospel. But, now they were having a disagreement about something. We don't know if their disagreement was about something big or something small.

But, whatever their disagreement whether it was big or small, important or unimportant ... Paul wanted to remind them that what united them in the faith was more important than what divided them. He encouraged them to "agree in the Lord."

I don't think this means they had to agree on everything. I don't think that they had to accept each other's arguments, but it did mean that they had to recognize a higher common calling.

The "cure" Paul offers for persecutions from outside the church and dissension within the church seems to be the same. Focus on the joy, the joy that is ours in the Lord. "Rejoice in the Lord always," the apostle said. We won't always agree on the issues of the day, but we can agree on our need for the joy of the Lord. We can agree that we truly want to do God's will even though we understand that will differently at times.

REJOICE "IN THE LORD"

Given the circumstances of this letter, we cannot say that Paul was advocating a kind of empty-headed positive thinking that seems to be so popular these days. Paul was talking about a hope that comes from above, a divine promise which he felt would transform the truly anxiety-producing situations that he and others were facing. This was no theoretical piece of advice for Paul. This was a sermon he lived as well as preached.

The key phrase in this passage is the phrase "in the Lord." Paul was not talking about a joy that comes about because of an action or strength we have within ourselves. Paul is not talking about a joy that comes because we are able to solve problems and get things done. Paul was not talking about a joy that was dependent upon our success or failure.

Paul was talking about a joy that comes only from the Lord, a birth from above, the kind of salvation that depends not upon our initiative but upon God's initiative. Perhaps that's why Paul repeats himself in our passage for today. Paul wrote, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice." (Philippians 4:4)

Paul knew that he and the Philippians had many reasons to despair. But, he didn't want them to focus upon the pain of their current situation. He wanted them to focus upon the joyful promise that was given them in Christ Jesus.

I believe that our inner attitudes do not have to reflect our outer circumstances. We need to remember what is proclaimed in Philippians 4:5. No matter what happens to us the "Lord is near." (Philippians 4:5) We need to interpret the events of life from God's perspective, and it is that eternal perspective which keeps us from becoming overly upset with others.

The full text of Philippians 4:5 reads, "Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near." In other words, a joyful, gentle spirit is the result of one who believes that God is near. The word translated gentle could also be translated reasonable or fair minded or charitable.

This is to be our attitude toward others.

We are to be gracious toward them because God in Christ has been gracious toward us.

Many people, many of whom are here today have taught me this truth with their lives. Many of you have a life filled with joy ... not because things have always gone right in your life but because you have God in your lives.

You have met difficult situations and difficult people with a sense of forbearance because God has given you joy and peace in abundance. Though you have often gone through the valley of the shadow of death, you have remembered and leaned upon this truth. The Lord is near. The Lord is with us every step of the way. And many of you have not only learned this truth you have also lived this truth.

I have always learned more about true joy from those who have struggled. Those who have struggled can personally attest to the fact that the Lord is near. Their situation has made it necessary for them to reach out for God's presence.

And this is the message of Advent that all of us need to understand.

No matter what happens the Lord is near. No matter what happens we know that God understands. In the Spirit of Christ, God is always with us and for us.

I think this one truth more than any other puts a whole new light on every difficult situation which comes our way.

WORRIES INTO PRAYERS

Paul draws a very important practical conclusion from all of this. Paul tells us that since the Lord is near we should replace anxiety with prayer. Since the Lord is near, we have more resources than we think we do. We need not be overwhelmed by the problems of this world because we have been given the power of a Presence, God's Presence in Jesus Christ.

This is one of those verses that people have always memorized because it has proven to be very helpful in a number of situations. If you are looking for a verse to put on your refrigerator, this is the one. Paul advises in Philippians 4:6,

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just leave the troubles of this world behind and with them the anxiety that those troubles cause us? But, of course we all know that we're more likely to win the lottery than have a trouble free life. This side of paradise the wish for a life without difficulties will never come true.

But, the important question is this, What will we do with our troubles? Will we use them as an occasion to increase the anxiety level in our life even more or will we use them as an opportunity to deepen our walk with God? Paul suggests that the latter should be our goal.

The important thing is not how many worries we have in our life but what we do with our worries. Paul's advice? Turn your worries into prayers.

I know that many of us have heard the old admonition that “prayer is the answer” since we were young. But, in fact, though that advice is often quoted, it is seldom taken. Prayer is often the last thing we try when worries come our way. We say things like, “Well, we've done all we can do. I guess all that's left is to pray about it.” Translation, “We'll pray now because the situation now looks hopeless.”

But, suppose prayer was our first response instead of our last resort? To use a baseball metaphor, suppose we prayed before the game even began instead of waiting until the count was 3-2 with the bases loaded and two out in the bottom of the ninth?

PEACE THAT PASSES ALL UNDERSTANDING

According to Paul, the result would be a life filled with more peace and less anxiety. The result would be a life filled with more joy and less anger. That's how our passage puts it. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Philippians 4:7 (NRSV)

The peace of God is not the absence of conflict, a charmed life so to speak. Biblical peace is the confident assurance of God's care in any circumstance. God, according to this passage, “guards” our hearts and minds. God gives us a peace that cannot be taken away by anyone or anything.

With the peace of God in Christ Jesus, we have no need to fear the present or the future. God's peace is a peace that passes all understanding. It is a peace which is not tied to the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” but to the providential care of God. It is a surprising peace much like the peace that came to earth so long ago in the baby Jesus.

Today is joy Sunday. The advent candle that we light this Sunday is pink, signifying that fact. We are getting closer to the big event. The Lord is close our Scripture tells us and so is the coming of one who is the epitome of joy.

The Bible is filled with references to this joyful presence of God. And almost always, when the joyful presence of God comes among men and women, it is a flabbergasting surprise.

When I think of the joyful presence of God, I think of those who first heard the good news about the birth of a Savior, shepherds in the field at night. The good tidings of great joy was such a surprise that they were frightened out of their wits!

When Mary Magdalene and the other women learned from the angel that Jesus had risen from the dead, the gospel of Matthew tells us, "So they left the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and ran to tell the disciples."

"Fear and great joy," "a peace that passes all understanding," and a hope that is not dependent upon circumstances. These seem like unlikely combinations, but they are all ways of expressing the one truth beyond all truths ... that God himself is with us in Jesus Christ ... not just long ago in the man Jesus but also here and now through the power of his Spirit.

Life is not just a series of random victories and tragedies. Life is the school that teaches us to trust God's power and promises. Life is the school which teaches us to trust the fact that the Lord is always near.

Throughout the Bible faith is described as a journey. Abraham was called by faith to leave home and go to the place that God would show him. The children of Israel were called by faith to leave captivity in Egypt, and travel through the desert to the promised land. The wise men journeyed from afar to find the new king. And, as the familiar Christmas card reminded me this past week, wise men still seek him.

The Lord is near, and it is through the journey of life that we find Him. Let us put aside the fears that surround us and go where He leads.

Amen.