

December 8, 2013
Port Gardner Church
Chuck Hickman

Advent: Week 2
The Bethlehem Candle
of Preparation / Peace

Prepare. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Preparation means to “get ready”. We are to get ready for God. Are we ready for God?
What does it mean to be ready?

Historical Background:

Luke 1:26-38 [26] In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, [27] to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. [28] And he came to her and said, “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” [29] But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. [30] And the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. [31] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. [32] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, [33] and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”

[34] And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?”

[35] And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. [36] And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God.” [38] And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Light Candle:

Mary, a virgin, was living in Galilee of Nazareth and was engaged to be married to Joseph, a Jewish carpenter. An angel visited her and explained to her that she would conceive a son by the power of the Holy Spirit. She would carry and give birth to this child and she would name him Jesus.

At first Mary was afraid and troubled by the angel's words.

Being a virgin, Mary questioned the angel, "How will this be?" The angel explained that the child would be God's own Son and, therefore, "nothing is impossible with God." Humbled and in awe, Mary believed the angel of the Lord and rejoiced in God her Savior.

Mary, coming from a good Jewish family, probably reflected with on the words found in Isaiah 7:14 foretelling this event,

Isaiah 7:14 [14] Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

When Mary told Joseph she was pregnant, he had every right to feel disgraced. He knew the child was not his own, and Mary's apparent unfaithfulness carried a grave social stigma. Joseph not only had the right to divorce Mary, under Jewish law **she could be put to death by stoning.**

Although Joseph's initial reaction was to break the engagement, **the appropriate thing for a righteous man to do**, he treated Mary with extreme kindness. He did not want to cause her further shame, so he decided to act quietly.

But God sent an angel to Joseph in a dream to verify Mary's story and reassure him that his marriage to her was God's will. The angel explained that the child within Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit, that his name would be Jesus and that he was the Messiah, God with us.

When Joseph woke from his dream, he willingly obeyed God and took Mary home to be his wife, in spite of the public humiliation he would face. Perhaps this noble quality is one of the reasons God chose him to be the Messiah's earthly father.

Joseph too must have wondered in awe as he remembered the words found in Isaiah 7:14,

At that time, Caesar Augustus decreed that a census be taken, and every person in the entire Roman world had to go to his own town to register. Joseph, being of the line of David, was required to go to Bethlehem to register with Mary.

Bethlehem is a tiny insignificant city, or is it. Bethlehem (city of bread), was a very instrumental location for God's work all throughout scripture.

Bethlehem is where the prophet Samuel anointed the shepherd boy, David to be the next King of Israel.

And Bethlehem has other tidbits of history, Especially in regards to the women of God.

Rachel, wife of Jacob is was buried there after she gave birth to Benjamin and died during labor. Her tomb stands to this day.

The story of Ruth and Naomi is set primarily in the town of Bethlehem and the surrounding area.

God in His divine providence chose an insignificant girl to give birth to the savior of the world in an insignificant stable, within and insignificant, nothing little town. A town where the stories of 3 insignificant women took place hundreds of years before. Some of the only recorded stories of women in the scriptures.

So lets talk about Preparation. Let's talk about Peace

The second candle of Advent is the candle of Preparation, the candle of Peace.

How can there be peace in preparation?

Doomsday preppers

Preparing for the birth of a child. Lots of things to deal with.

And what does the Bible say about Peace?

Philippians 4:4-7 [4] Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. [5] Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. **The Lord is at hand**; [6] do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. [7] And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

So this seems kind of easy. A nice little formula to gain peace in our lives.

Prayer + Thanksgiving = Peace

But if you've been a believer for any amount of time... you know that this doesn't necessarily work.

Sometimes we look to God for a magic pill to cure our situation.

We reduce scripture to a formula and that's not the way God works.

Scripture instead is about the Triune God. It is about trusting a person, not a formula.

Reducing God to a formula to get what we want can actually turn us away from that person and cause us to try and rely on a series of steps.

The Lord is Near

Commands like "do not be anxious" come after the REASON why we don't have to be anxious. Before we are told "do not be anxious" we are told... "The Lord is Near"

This what is happening to Mary and Joseph and in a broader sense, the people of Israel. They have been called to prepare for the coming of the Lord. A day of judgment and deliverance.

And the fact that the Lord is at hand changes everything... for all of us.

The emphasis is not on what we do or how we do it... like in the OT Law of Moses, but in whom we place our trust. It is on the God who has come to us, who hears, and who is with us. The only thing that could separate us from His love and presence are our sins, and they have been washed away by Jesus' blood.

Doesn't the presence of another person make a big difference? Especially when we are scared or hurt or need help? Another person helps to lessen our fears. Fear doesn't want a series of steps or rules to get us to peace. And if our fear can subside with the presence of a caring person, how much more so with the Saving son of God? The sworn presence of the reigning Christ?

So what does God do now that He is with us?

Will He kill all our enemies? Will He give us the money we need? Will He zap the person that want's to hurt us? Will He keep our kids from accidents? We have a pretty good idea that the answer to these questions is "not always". We know bad things happen to God's people. So what difference does God's presence mean when, although H is the Almighty God, He doesn't always use His power in the way we would like?

First we have to know that when God says He is present (or hears, sees, remembers) He is saying that He is doing something. He is never a passive bystander.

Second, He gives us what we need... when we need it.

Mary and Joseph needed assurance. God gave it to them. They needed to fulfill prophecy, He led them. They needed a place to have a baby, He provided for them.

Remember the story of the Israelites and they are starving in the wilderness and God provides Manna from heaven? He provided just enough for each day. Never enough to last more than that day.

God makes this promise, He will give you what you need when you need it... not before.

That means we get anxious don't we? We get anxious about tomorrow. Will we have enough.

Pastors opt out of Social Security.

Jesus came to save us from the American Dream. Because with the American Dream fulfilled, we convince ourselves that we have no need for God.

Think about this: Think of the times you were dreading an upcoming event and in the end it was not as bad as you anticipated. Relationships, financial situations, Job issues, medical problems. Think of the times you were surprised by God's grace and intervention on your behalf.

We will have hardships in life.

Scripture does not offer a kingdom that spares us from pain on this earth. But the king does promise that He will be with us in every circumstance and provide exactly what we need, when we need it.

Why? So that we may know him. The gospel is all about a relationship with God, not a formula to salvation or the other benefits of God.

Most of us have to admit that we initially came to Christ for the deal He was offering. Someone gave us a sales pitch, we heard the benefits of this relationship and we opted to buy in. And many of us continue to live our lives based on this premise. If I say these words, If I pray and thank God... I'll get the payoff. Better life on earth and eternal life in heaven. Hope and Peace in this life does not come without a fight.

God will work these traits in us surely but they come gradually. They come as we get to know God. They come as we pray, meditate on God's word, feed on scripture, feed on Christ and keep calling out for manna and grace.

The kingdom of God advances through weakness and dependence on the King, not through quick and bloodless victories. If you are feel weak, you are probably on the right path.

Essential in all of this is the gift of humility.

In our anxiety we are usually concerned about the things we love. We want control. We take things into our own hands to control our future , but we can't seem to prepare for all the contingencies...

When Kathleen and I were young parents we were sure we were going to do it better than anyone ever had.

We planned and prepared. We had the kids in all the right classes and lessons. Bible studies and music lessons. Hooked on Phonics and special diets. Everyone else was doing it wrong, but we were going to do it right. Yeah... whatever.

You best laid plans will be laid to waste. It's going to happen.

Illness, financial disaster, relationships... Some of you are saying... no... not us. Not me. I've got this thing down.

But you don't.

And then when we do it right... we want the recognition. See, now we're getting somewhere. It was never about the kids to begin with... it was about us. We are going to be recognized for our efforts. And when we don't get the recognition.. we speak up and demand it. We tell others of our wonderful kids and our difficult jobs and how hero like we are because dog gone it. We deserve the glory.

Recognition story.

Ever heard of the scripture... pride comes before the fall. And I say this with great experience.

Humility is key and humility comes from these experiences. So if you've got your life in order and everything is cool, you've got a handle on it... be ready... but of course you won't be ready... because YOU have it under control.

And this is where you lose YOUR peace, and look to God for the peace that He brings.

You see we want to protect OUR kingdom.

Find your anxieties and you will find that YOUR agenda is more important to you than God's.

You will find that you adopt your own interpretation of God's world rather than submit to God's clear words about His power, love and care.

Peter said this:

1 Peter 5:6-7 [6] *Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time he may exalt you, [7] casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.*

God asks us to do one more thing: Humble ourselves. Set our agenda down. In fact, we are to kill it. Murder it. Destroy it.

When a child's fears do not subside with the presence of a parent, the child is saying that the monster under the bed is stronger than the parent, or the parent doesn't care about the child's best interests. The child has a lack of confidence in the parent.

Humility, in contrast, hears the voice of the parent and believes the parent can be trusted.

Why? Because the child has a relationship with the parent. The child knows the parent. The child trusts the parent.

Humility says " I believe you more than I believe my eyes or my imagination". Humility is submissive.

Uh oh... there it is. Submission.

Information and knowledge don't bring peace. And we need to respond to what we hear and see with humility and trust.

Preparation. Peace.

Being prepared brings peace.

There are steps to peace, but they are different than the steps we take in following a recipe. These steps are personal.

Know the God who comes near, expect Him to take care of you and walk in humility before Him.

Don't give up on the pursuit of peace.

Know God, be prepared, know His peace.

So... are we prepared?