

WHAT'S IN A STORY: Journey

A simple example. John Deere releases a publicity campaign which proclaims, "We're giving away a holiday ham in the parking lot of our Moline production facility, on Friday from noon to three!" Clear. Simple. Direct. Free ham. Except. Except that in that mock marketing campaign, Deere isn't promising a free ham for everyone, is it? We'll get back to that question at the end of this sermon.

Which is another sermon in our series about the Christmas story, exploring its different characteristics. We talked first about the anticipation that's in the Christmas story, brought about by the prophets' expectations of God's intervention in the human fray. We then reviewed the obstacles and potential obstacles people in the Christmas story posed. Zechariah didn't believe he and his wife could have a child. The shepherds could have rejected the angels' good news. The wise men could have refused to follow the star. And we noticed that the main obstacles in the story were people, like us. Then last week our focus was recognition, our need to recognize what God did for us in the birth of Christ, and what God is doing still in our lives - what around here we call God things.

This week, our key word is journey, a term whose importance we can identify with a simple thought experiment: The shepherds in the fields. An angel announces the birth of the savior. Other angels create a chorus of praise to God, then return to heaven. If the story ends there, with some shell-shocked shepherds trying to make sense of their encounter with some out of this world creatures, what doesn't happen? The shepherds don't go to Bethlehem. I'm sure you remember the story. Shepherds run to town to see what the angels' fuss was about. If the story ended with the angels' return to heaven, the shepherds remain in the field, and there is no visit to the manger.

But there is more that doesn't happen: Lk 2.17-20.... If the shepherds don't travel to Bethlehem, lots of people don't hear the news, and the shepherds don't spend the rest of the night, and perhaps the rest of their lives, praising God for what they had seen. It's not enough that the angels visit the shepherds. It's not enough that the shepherds listen to what the angels say and sing. The Christmas story is not complete without the shepherds' journey to find the baby they've been told about.

A second version of the same basic thought experiment. The wise men see a star, conclude that it's a sign from heaven that will lead them to the promised messiah. If THAT part of the Christmas story ends there - with some astrologers staring at an astronomical phenomenon - what doesn't happen? They don't make the trip to Bethlehem. They don't meet Herod and eventually scuttle his efforts to find the newborn Jesus. They don't offer their gifts of praise. That is, if they don't follow the star - if they don't make THAT journey - they don't meet Jesus.

In the first three weeks of this series, we've focused more on the characters in the story - we've been an audience for the events reported in the Gospels. Today we become the story, we become principal characters without whom the story suddenly stops, with little hope of future impact. Today we acknowledge that pretty pictures and familiar seasonal songs alone don't constitute a good Christmas. Today we acknowledge that family gatherings and Christmas Eve services alone don't constitute a good Christmas. Today we acknowledge that the angels issue an invitation we must accept, and the star lights a path we must follow if Christmas is to be a holy day, not simply a holiday. Today we acknowledge that the Christmas story doesn't work if we, its hearers, remain in our seats, or in the lives we've been living.

Think about the people Jesus healed. Nearly every one of got healed because he or she got to Jesus - walked or crawled or cried out to him themselves, or perhaps had help from their friends to them in front of him. I think there's one example in any of the Gospels where Jesus initiated the healing. In every other case, people had to get to him, had to make the journey from where they were to where he was. Just like the journey the shepherds and wise men had to make the journey from where they were to where Jesus was in Bethlehem.

The Christmas story is one in which we're participants, not observers. When the angels tell of the birth of the messiah, they talk to us. When the star lights a path of discovery, it lights it for us. When Jesus is born in the manger, it is with the expectation that those of us who want to see him, meet him, get to know him, fall in love with and then follow him, will make the effort: to find him, to listen to him, to learn from him, and to shape our lives around him.

The lesson for today is simple: People in need of healing don't get healed unless they find a healer. No one is saved without an encounter with a savior. Christmas is not a celebration without people who celebrate it. We don't meet Jesus until we seek him out.

In our culture, we make Christmas a spectator sport. Watch "It's a Wonderful Life." Watch a TV special from the Holy Land. Watch or read or listen as other people present the story to us. But that's not the kind of event Christmas is. Christmas is a journey of discovery and wonder and personal choice. It is our saying to the angels, thanks for the invitation. My life is not great at the moment, so I accept. I'm going to go look for this savior you're talking about. It's saying to the star, thanks for your guidance. You're telling me that I have to go find Jesus, that spiritual health is not an afternoon in the recliner; it's a lifetime on the road, searching for Jesus where he is today.

My word for you today is very simple: Get off your year-ends and start searching. Through prayer, or Bible study, through participation in our ministries - yet ANOTHER reason this from (ministry claim form) matters - look for a Jesus who is more than the star of a Christmas program. Search for a Jesus who has his hand out to you today, who says, I want you to follow me, and if you follow me, I promise I will give new life, I will give you new hope. I will set you free from you guilt and shame. I will shout your name before the throne of heaven. I promise I won't make it hard on you. I promise you'll be able to handle the life I ask from you. But if that's to happen - if my birth is to mean anything, if my teachings are to mean anything to you, if my promises are to mean anything to you, you have to come for me, you have to make the journey from where you are to where I am. He said as much when he offered the most powerful of his promises: MT 11.28....

I really hope you have a great Christmas Day tomorrow - but know something: spiritually, faithfully, your great Christmas begins with your journey from where you are in life, to where Jesus is. Tonight, that's the manger; join us at 9p.m. Tomorrow that's the manger - join your family in celebration. This coming week and in the new year that's out there - that's among the hurting and wounded of your world who need to know as much if not more than you do that there is something better waiting for them. And you can show them the way.

To close, back to the free hams. John Deere parking lot. I said that ham's not free to everyone. Why not? Because it's only free to those who make the trip to get one. Christ is born in Bethlehem... for those who make the trip to find him. This Christmas, be one of those people.