

January 1, 2012
New Years Day
Ellicott City Parish, Bethany UMC campus
David W. Simpson

Sermon: From Incarnation to Redemption

Scriptures: Ephesians 1:3-14, Matthew 25:31-46

Key Verse: "He has made known to us the mystery of his will...as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth."

I. We all want to be part of something important.

People rise before dawn to stand outside the windows of the New York studios where the early morning network programs are broadcast. Just being there, a few feet and a plate glass window away from the movie stars and the global leaders who are being interviewed live on national television, or standing a few feet away from the celebrity anchorperson as he or she works the crowd, give a bystander a sense of importance.

A few years ago Tom Brokaw called his bestselling book *The Greatest Generation* because everyone alive during World War II had a part in something significant. From the GI on the beaches of Normandy to Rosie who riveted together the tanks and airplanes to the schoolchildren who saved their nickels to buy war bonds, all were caught up in something bigger than themselves that determined the course of history.



II. The human spirit needs to be a part of important, something bigger than itself.

One of the most debilitating things that can happen to a person is to think his or her life doesn't matter, or doesn't mean much. We are all familiar with the stories of the abuses of the welfare system. We have heard and read the stories of welfare queens and deadbeat dads. Even here with what we do with our discretionary dollars we see folks who seem to spend all their efforts trying to scam the system. The good news though is that statistics prove that the majority of welfare recipients do not like being on the dole. And, when they are able to find a solution they do their best to get off the system as soon as they can because all of us have a basic need to feel like we are not only making our own way, but also pulling our fair share of the load and somehow making a contribution if only in small way.

One of the greatest challenges of aging is to find purpose in life even as your capacities slow down. One of the saddest and hardest things you hear if you spend much time in nursing homes is the lament, "I am no good to anybody anymore."

III. The wonderful news of the gospel is that in Jesus Christ every one of us is part of something that has cosmic significance.

Listen to how the book of Ephesians opens. Listen to what you are part of in Jesus.

The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ...chose us in Christ before the foundations of the world to be holy and blameless in love...He has made known to us the mystery of his will...as a plan for the fullness of time, to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and on earth...having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will. (Ephesians 1:3-5)

What we are part of in Christ is nothing less than his work of putting creation back together, the redemption of creation. That is the point of the whole Christmas event, the Incarnation. In the coming of Jesus the Kingdom of God has begun to be manifested in our midst and through his suffering, death and resurrection, planet earth is moving inexorably toward redemption and restoration. Heaven and earth, with all their brokenness, their failures, their pains, their disappointments, are being healed, restored, given a new start. The prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament describes the goal toward which we are pressing as that time when everything we consider inevitable will be reversed, when even the most basic enmities will be abolished. *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together.”* A part of the logic of the Christian calendar is that we move from the Christmas and the Incarnation directly into the New Year, full of hope and determination to do better. We resolve and make covenant with ourselves, with each other and with God, saying this year will be different.



When Jesus was born in Bethlehem, God began to restore creation to the way God intended it to be. Listen to how the book of Revelation describes the work of which we I

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; they will be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.

IV. We participate in Christ cosmic work as we practice our faith and make covenant with God to live as citizens of the in-breaking kingdom. Now, that may seem like an overwhelming task and maybe a little like some of our overly ambitious New Year’s resolutions. Of course, it is not something God expects you or me to do by the end of next week or by ourselves. We are no more expected to bring in the Kingdom of God by ourselves that members of the so-called Greatest Generation were expected to defeat Hitler and turn back Tojo single-handedly. But you and I, each one of us, is part of that great endeavor. You and I are to bear witness to the Incarnation the ongoing work of redemption and restoration, and we do it every time we do as Christ commanded us.

We do it when we practice the Great Commandment: *“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.”*

We do it when we are faithful to the Great Commission: *“Go therefore, into all the world teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost.”*

And, we do it when live out the Great Requirement: *“...love mercy, do justice and walk humbly with God.”*

When we gather to worship, we get insights into what it will be like when heaven and earth are reunited. On those Sunday mornings when the music leaves you speechless, when you hear words that comfort and inspire, when your prayers draw you into the very heart of God...those are glimpses of what awaits us when our work here is done.

When the words of Jesus recorded in Matthew become real for us, *“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in. I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you visited me.”* These



are the ways we participate in the redemption of all creation. When we care for others in the name of Christ, when we spend time with an elderly friend in a nursing home, when we tutor a child, when the globe, these are the ways we show the world that something great is going on all around us. The Kingdom of God is breaking into the present.

There are times when you may not be able to see it because of the greed and selfishness and violence that permeate this life. Like the writer of Hebrews says, *“God has left nothing that is not subject to [Jesus]. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus,...now crowned with glory and honor ...”* And because we see Jesus and believe in him and put our trust in him we participate in his coming. Every time we worship or teach a child or care for one another in need, we take one step closer toward that day when *“justice shall roll down like water and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream”*. Every time we covenant ourselves to Jesus, we take one step toward that day when the redemption of creation will be complete. Thanks be to God. Amen.