

BIGGER ON THE INSIDE

4th Sunday in Advent

12-19-04
Ken Peterson

Luke 2:1-20

INTRODUCTION

I remember when the carnival made its annual stop in the little Montana town I grew up in. Besides all those rides, booths, and concession stands there was usually a trailer or two with the outside painted, "House of Horrors" or some such thing. It certainly didn't look like much from the outside. I would skeptically think, how much could they put in that trailer? But then, curiosity getting the best of me, I'd pay the money and climb the metal stairs to enter the darkness of the House of Horrors. When I climbed out the exit, after a few harrowing, heart-pounding encounters and a scream or two (from the girls only, of course) I had the feeling, "Wow! That was certainly much bigger on the inside than on the outside!"

Haven't you too had experiences like that? Maybe it wasn't at a carnival but another building housing some mind-stretching, imagination-inspiring things. A few years ago, they spent millions and millions of dollars constructing a rain forest, housed in a building at the Cleveland zoo. At the time, we lived only about 70 miles away. Polly was excited to go see it, I was skeptical— "You can't get the feel of a rain forest in a building!" When we went, I was certain the building we faced could never contain a rain forest. Leaving that same building, with our minds expanded by new information and experiences and hearts thrilled with wonder, I looked again at the building and thought, "I never would of guessed what they could do in that space." Indeed it was a lot bigger inside than outside.

There is a gripping scene in The Last Battle, the final volume in The Chronicles of Narnia, that classic series of children's book by C. S. Lewis. Tirian is in the final struggle with evil and is forced through the door of a tiny stable. He is amazed to suddenly, unexpectedly find himself in Aslan's Kingdom— the Narnia version of the Kingdom of Heaven. Then there is this little dialogue I find pregnant with meaning:

"It seems, then," said Tirian, smiling himself, "that the Stable seen from within the Stable seen from without are two different places.

"Yes," said the Lord Digory. "Its inside is bigger than its outside."

"Yes," said Queen Lucy. "In our world too, a Stable once had something inside it that was bigger than our whole world."

As we contemplate the Christmas stable that Queen Lucy refers to, I want us to reflect on how the Stable seen from the inside and the stable seen from the outside are two entirely different places. The non-Christian world consistently misses what is really happening in the Christmas story because they fail to enter into it through this Jesus born in a manger. Through that stable door, we can enter the huge, unlimited kingdom of God.

THE INSIDE STORY

To many, the Christmas story is little more than a touching story of a peasant couple giving birth to Jesus in a stable, that is, if they even get that far. Unfortunately, the secular versions of Santa Claus and Frosty the Snowman often overshadow the true story. In a survey a few years ago among those who identified themselves as Christians, less than half of those surveyed said Jesus' birth was the most significant aspect of Christmas. The most popular answer, beating out Jesus by 7%, said family time as the most important part of Christmas. Remember, this is among Christians! While I'm certainly all for family time, I still find that rather shocking. It is further evidence of our increasing secularism, even in the church. Obviously, many of us are missing what's inside the stable.

In the Christmas narrative, everyone who goes inside with faith discovers that which is bigger than our whole world. Here is God himself, the Creator of the universe taking on humanity in it's humblest, most vulnerable form— a helpless baby. The Shepherds come at the bidding of angels and discover the Savior of the world. They leave no longer "just shepherds" but the first proclaimers, spreading the "good news of great joy." Joseph, Mary, and Elizabeth all join in wonder at the incarnation of God in human flesh. I like the way G. K. Chesterton expresses it:

*The hands that made the sun and stars
were too small to reach the huge heads of the cattle....*

Emmanuel, "God with us"— God present, on our side, helping us. Here thousands of years of prophecy are fulfilled. The Magi come (and now I'm using the stable figuratively, since they came some time after the birth) and their worship changes their lives forever. Indeed, as Tirian discovers, *the Stable seen from within and the Stable seen from without are two different places.*

How do we get inside? It is always highly personal. A lifetime around the stable, knowing the facts, looking in the door doesn't put us inside. Each one of us must make that journey inside, believe for ourselves, and worship Him. This happens only when we realize we need a Savior— someone to save us from our sinful, bent-toward-evil natures. We realize our lives have been self-absorbed and self-propelled and that doing it *my way* is actually rebellion against our rightful Lord. So we come humbly in repentance, asking for forgiveness not only for our sinful acts, but for our hearts that cling to being in charge of things. As we kneel before the manger in worship, confess our belief in Jesus, trusting our lives to Him, it becomes the act that enthrones Him in our lives and over our lives. We make Him our Lord. With that we enter the world inside. A miracle takes place within us in which Christ actually enters our hearts in the Holy Spirit. Our viewpoint is radically changed, for He whom the whole world could not contain now lives inside us. We're in a new world, living in the kingdom of God. As 2 Cor. 5:17 affirms, *if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation.; the old has gone, the new has come!*

I hope you know that from personal experience. Perhaps you're recalling a time in a church service, at a retreat event, or maybe an encounter in private when you understood and embraced this truth in a way you never had before. As you embarked on this new way of faith in Jesus, trusting Him completely with your life, a whole new world opened up before you. As you look back at that event and try to describe it, it is simply one of those things you can't fully

comprehend from the outside. You can maybe describe the sermon or talk in which the truth dawned, the music that moved your heart, but none of it really adds up to what happened when looking at it from the outside trying to explain it. Only inside can we know. Indeed we have stepped into the immensity of the kingdom of God even while we live in this world.

Let's look at what happens once we have entered in– the ways it expands and reshapes our living. The world view and the life we begin living is absolutely amazing. Our lives and our world are greatly enlarged with meaning and purpose.

LIVING INSIDE OUT

Unfortunately, we often forget the significance of what really has happened, or let this world's viewpoint diminish it's significance. We need to move past the manger into living in the kingdom of God in every part of our lives. Personal salvation is wonderful. But, there is so much more as we enter into this new life of following Jesus in all we do. I'd like to consider this in just two areas: the people we encounter and the events of our world.

Every person takes on greater significance and importance to us. C. S. Lewis said it succinctly:

*The Son of God became a man
to enable man to become sons of God.*

Christmas means, there are no unimportant people. Each one of us can become a son or daughter of God. This is incredible and huge. All who enter the door of the stable and worship Jesus are actually adopted into God's family so we belong to Him, the Creator of the universe! Even those who have never entered in have within them that potential. Jesus Christ died for every single person on the face of the earth. How dare we ever show contempt or disrespect for any of them? Must we not love those whom He loves so much?

This world diminishes us, telling us we are little more than the mammals. The Bible tells us that we bear within us the image of God. One day we are going to rule and reign with Christ over all creation. Friends, this is BIG...REALLY BIG. What dignity, what purpose! That ought to do something for your sagging self-esteem. The New Testament goes on to apply this to every area of our lives as believers:

- § There are no "mere marriages." Actually in marriage we are to show forth the sacrificial love Christ showed for the church. People should look at our marriages and see the kingdom of God in miniature (Eph. 5:25-33). What an exalted view of marriage!
- § When it comes to sexual purity, Paul reminds people, "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit? ...therefore honor God with your body (1 Cor. 6:15 & 20)."
- § And, when people in the church are having disputes with one another, suing each other, Paul says, stop that..."Do you not know *we* will judge angels?" (1 Cor. 6:3).

Can you see what is happening? The Bible says, "Take hold of the greatness for which God has created you. Begin to live in that reality, not in the pettiness of this world. No wonder Christians have always been at the forefront of:

- § Human rights and education for all;
- § Caring for the sick, the poor, and all the needy;
- § Missions, bringing a Savior to all people everywhere;

because everybody is of incredible value and worth.

Think also of the impact of kingdom living on the events we face in the world. There are no mere events, mere happenings, no, "whatever will be will be." God is ordering our universe. He has plans and purpose for us and all that happens in our world. And all of it will ultimately come together in perfection and beauty when Christ returns in power and great glory. We have the assurance of Rom. 8:28, *In all things, God works for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose.* While we wrestle with a lot of "whys" and questions regarding this or that, it is wonderful to realize God is in control and we are actually participants with God in the ultimate redemption of the world.

John was given that vision recorded in Revelation in one of the most confusing times of all, in the midst of horrendous persecution of the early church. These were frightening times. When the church gathered on the Lord's day, they didn't know who might be arrested or killed before the next time they gathered. While the vision in Revelation doesn't give details of what and how it all will come about, echoing unmistakably throughout the book is the refrain,

Hallelujah! The Lord our God omnipotent reigneth! (Rev. 19:6)

God is in control of history and it is moving to His conclusion when Jesus Christ will reign forever and ever. What a different way to look at every event in our world and in our lives. It is *all* part of an eternal plan that began before creation and will continue into eternity, forever and ever. Let me repeat, THIS IS BIG! REALLY BIG!

This last week, Polly had a wonderful answer to prayer. I'd like her to tell you about it in her words.

(Polly)

Last year when we had the 40 Days of Purpose program, I was one of the people organizing it. One thing that Rick Warren strongly suggested was for churches to participate in a mission trip in order to stretch our vistas and faith and see the world as our mission field. Well, we did make an attempt to do that several months ago, but it seemed we didn't get quite enough people wanting to go to make it feasible. Paul and Bonnie Freese were our resource people since they have often been in Mexico, know Spanish, and their daughter and family were there with Wycliffe Bible Translators. Just recently, however, due to some changes, the trip was suddenly on again.

To be absolutely honest, I was relieved when it looked as if we weren't going and quite dismayed to learn it was on again. I felt, after praying about it, that I should go. But I was definitely dragging my feet. Why was I so reluctant, you ask? I knew we'd be going to a primitive village where we had to sleep in hammocks, cook our own food, would probably be doing concrete work, and put on an after-school program for up to 100 Mayan kids. That sounded exhausting and uncomfortable. But, most of my reluctance was do to FEAR. I was so afraid I would get sick due to the unsanitary conditions, unsafe drinking water, etc. Once before, I had a bad experience of getting *very* sick overseas and it kept playing back in my mind. Then, we got some more detailed information on our trip, and that *really* had me nervous. Let me

read a few things from it:

- § “NEVER, go barefooted. There are parasites in the earth that can enter through the soles of your feet.
- § To keep the hammock free of germs, at no time should your shoes be in the hammock or should it touch the floor.... Also bring a protective sack in which to store you hammock.
- § Before sleeping, apply a light mist of insect repellent to the entire surface of the hammock, also spray all exposed body parts.”

For the kitchen work, the following were listed:

- § “Plan on bringing a good supply of fly strips. They should be hung in strategic areas around the kitchen.
- § Roach and ant bait boxes may be placed on floors in corners.
- § All work surfaces should be wiped with Lysol, Clorox, or other fragrant disinfectant before and after preparing any food.
- § Remember to protect the “spigots” of your coolers when left in the open. The flies are attracted to the sweet flavorings inside those features.
- § Flies are not cute! Keep in mind: Anytime a fly lands, it is either laying an egg, regurgitating, or defecating.
- § The plates should be dipped in Clorox water BEFORE and AFTER eating.
- § As flies may have landed on dishes, it is highly recommended that each person dip their dishes in Clorox water before eating.”

Then, under “Construction Site Safety:”

- § “Work breaks should be frequent (at least every hour). Water should be consumed copiously. Wet bandanas can be worn around the neck. Workers should seek shade during all breaks.
- § Scorpions and tarantulas seek shade in the heat of the day. Be careful around stacks of building materials.”

I could picture myself sleeping in my hammock and having a tarantula or black widow spider come down onto my face, or having to get up in the night and encountering scorpions and cockroaches. But mostly I feared getting violently sick and being in a dirty place trying to recover. My imaginings got so bad I was finding it hard to sleep at night.

I prayed that the Lord would help me and an amazing thing happened on Thursday morning. I was reading, as usual, in Our Daily Bread devotionals that we get at the church. Well, the Bible reading was Psalm 95 and so I began to read it. When I came to vs. 8, it leapt off the page at me, “Don’t harden you hearts as Israel did at Meribah....” Meribah! That sounds almost exactly like Merida, which is the city in Mexico we fly into to begin our mission trip out to a Mayan village. My Bible cross-reference for that verse directed me to Numbers 20:12. That told the story of the Israelites wandering in the desert for 40 years because of their disobedience in going into the Promised Land because of their fear of giants. In this particular instance, they were complaining about not having water. Even though God provided water, Moses and Aaron went about it in the wrong manner, and God said to them, “Because you did not trust in me enough to honor me as holy in the sight of the Israelites, you will not bring this community into the land I give them (Num. 20:12).” Wow! That really hit the nail on the head. I was not trusting God enough to take

care of me, and I was complaining about water, just like the Israelites. And I was refusing to enter the “Promised Land” because of the giants of fear for my health. I had been guilty of murmuring and complaining just like the tiresome Israelites. I began to feel a great shifting in my paradigm. Mexico was the Promised Land that God intended for me to conquer and enjoy and I could trust Him to be right beside me to take care of any problems.

And, when I went back to my devotional guide to check on something, I discovered I had read the wrong day’s reading. Well, in this case, God directed me to the wrong day so it would be the right day for me!

Will I still be careful of the water and food? YOU BET! Will I take every pill or anything else I can for protection? YOU BET!. But now I feel more peace and less fear. I’m ready to go into the Promised Land and conquer.

(Ken)

Isn’t it wonderful how God enlarges us, stretches us, and breaks us out of our narrow, safe little worlds, leading us into the high adventure of following Him? The God who created all things wants to partner with us in bringing forth His kingdom, wherever He leads us to go.

CONCLUSION

As we close, let me ask you, "How are you viewing this Stable event, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ?" Are you on the outside, looking in, “Thinking, why all the fuss– what’s the big deal?” Or have you gone inside? Have you discovered the bigness of the kingdom of God. It is something beyond what any of us ever imagined possible. In fact, it is bigger than the whole world.

Are you letting it shape you, change you, and transform your world view? From the stable, everything looks different. People and events are all filled with thrilling possibilities. Think about it. Fear confines, restricts our lives; peace opens us up. Anger and hatred narrow us; forgiveness and love enlarge us. Judgmental attitudes imprison us; grace and mercy free us. Greed binds us; giving makes our lives expansive. That’s only the beginning of this larger world we enter when we come to Christ.

For some, maybe you've glimpsed the inside, but are still in the doorway, trying to stay outside too. You know the reality, but are afraid to give up control and go all the way in. That is a miserable place to be– not participating in the joy of kingdom living and at the same time, knowing the emptiness and superficiality of where we're living. To you I urge, take the plunge, go all the way in. It is far bigger and better than you know.