

Christmas Eve Service

Luke 2:7

December 24, 2011

In the past I have used stories by pastor Bob Russell and I want to use one this evening. He tells about a time when a Christmas Eve service he conducted didn't go so well. Now some of the audio in in this video is not the best, but I think if we listen carefully its good enough. Take look.

Pastor Russell speaks about the ultimate joy Christ brings but sometimes that joy is overshadowed by the cares of this life.

Message

The song Jay sung was written by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, an American Poet. He was well respected and successful. Yet in spite of being a man of means, notoriety and comfortable living he also knew sorrow. He was man that in spite of all his accomplishments, faced life situations that brought him to the point of deep soul searching including the questioning of God. His dark hour of the soul came in a period of his life after his wife died and then 2 years later his son enlisted in the Union Army during the fight of the Civil War. Here is what author Megan Thompson writes about Longfellow and the story behind the song, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

Author Megan Thompson writes,

In the midst of his sorrows—the War, a dead wife, a young family to raise alone, and a son who hovered near death—Longfellow thought of all the other households in the Union whose holidays were marred, some forever, by the events of the last three years. He did what writers do: he wrote. The resulting poem was the one we know as "I Heard the Bells On Christmas Day." The poem was not intended to join the pantheon of sugary sweet Christmas carols already in place.

There are two stanzas of the poem that never made it to the song we know today. They describe the effect of the War, and the sadness of the inhumanity it had caused, so antithetical to the spirit of Christmas.

The two stanzas omitted read like this:

“Then from each black, accursed mouth
The cannon thundered from the South,
And with the sound
The carols drowned

Of peace on Earth, goodwill to men!
It was as if an earthquake rent
The hearthstones of a continent,
And made forlorn
The households born.”

His poem could speak for any us because we experience personally things in life that can seem to mock our trust that through Jesus Christ, God provides peace. Perhaps we listen to the news and we learn of the rash of not just violence abroad, but here in our country. We hear about more and more parents murdering their own children. This past week the story broke about western New York, where a woman sent her husband out to visit a friend and by the time he returned she shot and killed their daughter, her father and then committed suicide. It can make us think where is the peace?

Many in our community have had the McNeil family on their hearts. Delmer McNeil, the father and his son Tripp were burnt in a house fire a few weeks back. This past week Delmer died and losing his battle trying to recover from the burns while his son Tripp remains hospitalized in Ohio. It's heart breaking stories like these that cause any of us to understand the heavy heart by which Longfellow wrote his poem and questioned whether the reality of life mock the message of Christmas - peace on earth. We can

connect with the struggle to sometimes trust and experience the promise of peace, Christ was suppose to bring.

But Longfellow's song claimed that ultimately a message of hope that God's peace was greater and louder than noise of doubt and despair of his day. He claimed God can feed our souls in the in spite of the wrong that exist in the world.

- The story of Jesus and his birth is the reminder that whatever makes us restless in our hearts ultimately can only be fed by God. Jesus is the fulfillment of teaching like Deuteronomy 8:3 states that, **One does not live by bread alone but every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. Jesus would also quote that same scripture.**
- Isaiah the prophet once questioned his people that were casual in their relationship with God and asked a question, (55:2) **“Why do you spend your money on that which is not bread? He knew they chased after things that would never fully satisfy.”**

Maybe then it is relevant tonight to read just one simple verse as our Christmas Eve passage from Luke 2:7. **“And she gave birth to her first born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room in the inn.”**

Luke 2:7

The core of the entire scene of the birth of Jesus points to God's desire to feed our souls.

- We know from the scriptures Jesus was born in the city of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was known as the city of bread. Coincidence that he was born in town with that meaning to his name, or God's way of getting his message across.
- We know that after Jesus was born he was laid in a manger. The manger was a feeding trough for animals.
- Jesus would later call him self the “Bread of life - John 6:35.

From various points of view the scriptures have always claimed what God desires most is to be the one to feed our souls instead of the false gods and promises of this life.

Pastor Adam Hamilton states, “What we really hunger for will not be found under the tree on Christmas morning. We hunger for meaning, for joy, for hope in the face of despair. We hunger to know that we can be forgiven and start new after we regret. We hunger for a love that will not let us go and for life and triumph over death.” (Adam Hamilton P.129)

When our stomachs growl we eat because we know our bodies need nourishing. Our souls growl with hunger in many ways. Christ came to feed our souls. The groaning and growling might be our denial about getting older. It might be our search for significance, or to be free from despair. Christ is the only one that can really calm that hunger.

That is why we are now going to move into a time of communion. We are not going to recite aloud as we usually do the confessional prayer together. Instead, I am going ask that we bow our heads for a few moments as Suzanne plays. I invite each of you to pray in your own way to ask God’s spirit to feed us regarding whatever is upon your heart.

We’ll have a few moments of prayer.

Then you’ll be invited to come forward and take the bread and eat that symbolizes the body Jesus laid down for us and drink from the cup of juice that symbolizes his blood shed for us. If you wish, your welcome to stop at the altar and pray. When you are ready to return your seat you may pick up a candle out of the baskets on the altar for the candlelight portion of our service. I ask that we do this as a reminder that the only way to live by the light and give away the light of Jesus Christ is to first be fed by him - that is why he came.

