

Luke 3:7-18
Creekside COB
December 13, 2009

'I Am What I Am!'

There was an article written for "Women's Day" magazine entitled, "The Nativity According To Big Matthew." A young teacher, just out of college, was assigned to direct the annual Christmas pageant. The play had already been cast by the children themselves. For the role of Joseph, a boy they called "Big Matthew" had been chosen. The children were sure he was perfect for the part, but the teacher had his doubts. Big Matthew was the tallest and strongest boy in his class, and also the most hyperactive. After weeks of rehearsal, the time came for the performance. As the final lines of a carol were sung, "Christ, the Savior is born ... Christ the Savior is born," the curtain opened. On the stage, Mary and Joseph were sleeping peacefully on flour sacks. They were surrounded by animals uttering their familiar sounds. Cynthia forgot she was a sheep and was mooing loudly. Paul, the shyest boy in the class (also a "sheep"), took one look at the audience, quickly headed for the wings and disappeared. On cue, the number one angel appeared. In her arms was the Baby Jesus. Carefully, she placed the child on the straw at Mary's feet and recited the Nativity Story from Luke's Gospel. As she was saying the words, "... wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger," Big Matthew awakened. He yawned, looked down and seemed surprised to discover the Child at Mary's feet. "To this day," wrote the teacher, "I cannot imagine what possessed him. He shook Mary's shoulder rather roughly and shouted, 'Mary! Mary! Wake up and see what you had during the night!'¹

In today's scripture passage, John is preparing the way for an extraordinary man. A man who was born thirty years before that John is not worthy to untie the thong of His sandals. John wants them to

open their hearts and eyes to see who it is that is born of a Child Mary. John wants them to see He is not just any Messiah. John wants them to see that there is something more than they expect - there is something unique about Him.

Jesus is special in all of history. He is unique in the way He was born - existing in the eternal Spirit - the Christ Spirit, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (Jn. 1:1). Jesus is extraordinary as He is the presence of God among us. He is majestic in His teaching and His miracles. He is meek and powerful at the same time, He is amazing in His death and Resurrection and He is pure in His sinlessness and His love.

In today's passage, John announces to all the same message of Jesus Christ as the angels did the night of our Savior's birth, from Luke 2:19 *"behold, I bring you Good News of a great joy which will come to all people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord"*

Jesus is phenomenal in the way He brings joy into the world. Jesus brings all of us the gift of joy.

The people of God are a people of joy because, in and through Jesus Christ, God gives Himself. He gives Himself to us in all situations even the most unbearable ones. The spirit of joy is throughout the Bible. We can see it especially in Paul's Epistles. As we talked about last week, Paul suffered much adversity. Around every corner there was something ready to stop him. But in the midst He found joy. Even the scripture passage that I preached on 'peace' was titled joy in some translations. What beautiful words Paul speaks when He speaks on the joy of Christ 'Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice.'

The people suffered then and I don't have to tell you of the sufferings in this world today. There isn't a person here that hasn't suffered through some trial and hardship in their life. We see the sadness around us as people run out of unemployment and can't afford to pay

for their utilities or put food on their table and gas in their cars. We know it and see it. But as people of God we do not turn away or hide from the problems in our lives but we walk in them and we find that God is in the midst. We find a God who cares for us and hears our requests. We find a God who provides for us and loves and forgives us. God is faithful even in our unfaithfulness.

We can't help to be a people of joy when we know that our God meets our deepest needs. We can't help but be people of joy when we know that our God heals our deepest hurts. We can't help to be a people of joy when we know that our God sees our tears and hears our cries. God is in the midst of our suffering and we have joy. We read the testimony of the New Testament church where they have joy in the midst of their Christian suffering. They sing psalms of praise. And why! Because God gives to the early Christians and to us - Himself. We know that wherever we go under whatever circumstance, God is in the midst. His grace goes before us taking care before we even get there. We can't help but to be a people of joy.

There is a wonderful poem that I would like all of us to say it together.

If you'd never been born, then what would you be?
 You might be a fish or a toad or a tree.
 You might be a doorknob or three baked potatoes.
 Worse than all that, you might be a wasn't.
 A wasn't just isn't. He just isn't present.
 But you -- you are you. Now isn't that pleasant?
 Today you are you, and it's truer
 than true that there's no one alive who is you-er than you.
 Shout loud, "I am lucky to be what I am!
 Thank goodness I'm not just a clam or a ham,
 or a dusty old jar of gooseberry jam.
 I am what I am , and it's a great thing to be.
 If I say so myself, 'Happy birthday to me!'"

Now this is a person of joy, is it not?

Now I am not talking about never growing in the Lord but I am talking about our circumstances.

I am What I am and it's a great thing to be. These could easily be words of Paul the apostle or maybe John the Baptist. We don't always select our calling in this life but we do know that God is in the midst and we know God gives joy. John knew it was his calling to be second fiddle to Jesus. That he was not the one. His lot was not easy but He called people to behold the good news of Jesus, the one who he was not worthy to even tie His sandals. And John attracted the masses to Him through His preaching of the good news of our unique God.

Have you ever notice that people are attracted to anyone who exudes joy? People are attracted to anyone is who is life-affirming and anyone who gives joy, gives life as well. And in that joy-filled life, these joyous people receive joy in the midst.

Listen to the words of Matthew 13:12: *For to those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.*

Jesus is saying that you have been given joy in my name and you will receive more however, if you are a griper and see things in a negative way, you receive more negativity by attracting negativity and your joy dissipates. It's just a natural law of life.

Charlie Brown has a hard time finding joy.

Lucy says to Charlie Brown, "You Charlie Brown are a foul ball in the line drive of life. You're the shadow of your own goal posts! You are three putts of eighteenth green! You are a seven-ten split in the tenth frame. You have dropped a rod and a reel in the lake of life! You are a missed free throw and a third strike. Do you understand? Have I made myself clear?"

Negativity brings us down. There are some people who should not be

in our circle of life. They just don't belong there. I would say that Charlie Brown needs to be with someone who brings him joy and lifts him up.

Do you know someone who brings you joy? Do you know someone who is a joy to be around? Do you know someone who encourages you and lifts you up? We can see how they bring life into the places where they are? These are the people who have made or make a difference in your life. These are the people who have influenced you, who you owe your success to.

You know who they are. These are the people who say I am who I am and that is a great thing to be.

For all of you who do not know me, may not know that I served as a prison chaplain while I attended seminary. I worked for the State of Ohio for one year in Dayton Correctional Institution. While I served there, I met a young man who was serving the 10th year of a 12 year sentence. This young man was no ordinary young man as he wore the joy of the Lord all over him. My husband said he thought he had the face of an angel. In the few conversations I had with him, he shared with me his testimony of how he came to know the Lord. While he was serving in another institution, he saw the Christians as different. He saw them with something that was different than the rest of the population. He saw the joy of the Lord. He wanted it. So he began stopping to see the chaplain. And then he began going to church in the prison. He began going once a month. And then he began going every other week until he finally went every week. He began to understand, I am Who I am and that is a great place to be.'

He saw something in those Christians that he wanted for himself. People see God in our midst and they want what we have. It is contagious joy. That is how the New Testament church was able to spread so quickly. When we lose our joy, it is saying that we have lost our God.

Paul and John the Baptist understood this idea. How about it today

saying, 'I am what I am and that is a good thing to be.'