

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

FINDING JESUS

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-20

The Christmas story according to St. Luke instructs us that we must look up before we can know what we are seeing when we look down. The attention of the shepherds in the fields of Bethlehem was caught by the angels in the sky over their heads. They looked up and the angel told them what they would see if they went down into town as they were told.

As you sit here in this building late on Christmas Eve, look up. What do you see?

Looking up at the ceiling is how I would have our preschool children begin the first chapel service of each year. It is amazing how many times four years would tell me the ceiling looked like a boat. The ceiling of this building does look like the inside of the hull of a boat. In fact, it looks very much like the bottom of the ark. On my trip to Egypt I found that such an appearance was an intentional architectural feature of the Coptic Christian churches. In the Egyptian church the symbolism of the church is that of an ark that carries Christians through the world. It is an image that serves them well in these turbulent days in Egypt. In Scripture we learn that the ark was a refuge for Noah and his family during the storm that flooded the earth. Therefore, the ark was the vehicle of salvation for the family of believers.

Likewise, in New Testament theology the Church is compared to the ark because its function in baptism and salvation are seen as parallel to the deliverance of Noah's family as representative of the people of God (1 Peter 3:18-22). Like the ark, which was built at the direction of God and according to his plan, the Church is God's handiwork and structured according to his will. As the importance of the ark was to be found in its contents, a family of believers in the world, so too, the Church is the ship of salvation because it is made up of the people of God – those who believe in Jesus Christ in the world.

In Scripture another "boat" played an important role in the redemption of God's people. The one who was to be used by God to deliver his people from slavery in Egypt arrived on the scene in a basket floating on the waters of the Nile. God pushed Moses' amphibious cradle right into the very midst of Pharaoh's family. A small, poor and insignificant Hebrew baby under the most vulnerable of conditions would bring liberation to God's people and ultimately deliver them to God's Promised Land.

So, as we look up on this Christmas Eve, our ribbed and vaulted ceiling looks a little different in the light of our candles. The diamond lens of our spiritual sight is turned to another facet and as we saw an ark we now see a cradle – not just any cradle, but a feeding trough turned up-side-down. It is in the celebration of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ that all these images come together and inform our understanding of Christmas. Like the ark of Noah and the reed boat of Moses, the manger of Jesus symbolizes God's plan for the redemption of the world. From his Word we know that his plan is to:

1. Redeem and save those who believe in him;
2. Work in the world to achieve that redemption; and
3. Use believers as the vehicle of his message of salvation.

The question, then, is why the topsy-turvy symbolism. Why an up-side-down ark and an inverted manger? Simply put – neither the ark nor the manger were ever meant to be an eternal dwelling place or even an everlasting refuge. A population cannot proliferate and fill the world if it is confined to a boat. Neither can a child grow into a man and lead a people if he is confined to a cradle. Like all other signs the ark and the manger have their function, which is to point to the reality that lies beyond it and not to be the reality themselves.

Several years ago I made an ark for each family of my grandchildren and each Christmas they receive another pair of animals. The first thing the children do when they play with the ark is to empty out all the animals and Mr. and Mrs. Noah. The quickest and most efficient manner is to turn the ark up-side-down. Likewise, if God wants to populate the world with his people, we must leave the ark and go into the world. The ark is up-side-down to remind us that this is not where we are to stay, but that we are to be in the world.

Much of the time we live our lives as if Jesus was incarcerated in the Church. Psychologists tell us that we tend to compartmentalize our lives. Depending on who you read our compartments may be the spiritual, the personal and the vocational; or the intellectual, the emotional and the physical; or even our church, our work and our family. By living in such a manner we attempt to justify our attitudes and actions based on our immediate environment. The result is that we act one way at work, another at home and still another at church. If that is the way we live our lives, then we are only comfortable with Jesus when we are in church. So it is not just the secularists that attack Tim Tebow for bringing Christ onto the football field, but also those of us who are profoundly disturbed by finding Jesus where we are not comfortable about his being.

But isn't Christianity all about finding Jesus? As the first century Romans, Jews and Disciples found out, trying to confine Jesus in a particular place will not work. As the angel told the women at the grave on Easter morning, *"you are looking for Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has been raised; he is not here.. he is going ahead of you to Galilee"* (Mark 16:6-7). That is the message of our beautiful ceiling. If you are to find the real Jesus, he is out in the world. Both the cradle and the tomb are up-side-down – they are empty.

What is true about Jesus must also be true for his body, the Church. We are not the body of Christ if we only gather to worship in the church. The body of Christ is only the body of Christ when we do what our Lord, Jesus is doing. Looking up at the bottom of the ark and the cradle reminds us that we are not to remain inside, but that the gravity of God would have us turned out into the world. As the Church we are to be in the world to announce and demonstrate the direction and purpose of God in the world through Jesus Christ.

The inverted cradle may serve us in an emergency as a shield against the slings and arrows of the evil one, but it is not to be our dwelling place. If we are to find Jesus and perform our God-given role to help others find Jesus, then we must be out in the world with Jesus. Those who believe in

Jesus are not to worship him only in the church building on Sunday mornings, but are to worship him out in the world where they work and play. It is there that we take Jesus to those who would never come into the church to find him.

The message of the Christmas cradle is that Jesus the Savior of the world has come. The message of our church ceiling is that we are to go out into the world with the gift of the message that God loves us enough to come and give life to the world.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, on this night as we gather around the crèche and remember your coming into the world as one of us in order to make us children of God, renew our faith and kindle within our hearts a love for God that cannot be contained in the four walls of this building or in the privacy of our own hearts. As we behold him this night as the babe in the manger and Savior of the world, may we daily encounter him in our lives as the sovereign King of creation and abdicate the throne of our lives to him and him alone. Amen.

Taken from a sermon preached by the Reverend Charles D. Alley, Rector of St. Matthew's Episcopal Church in Richmond, Virginia on December 24, 2011, Christmas Eve.