

In Response to Christmas

Psalm 148
Dec. 27, 2009

I. Introduction

- A. Debbie Harmon, of Wichita, KS says - My three-year-old son told me he learned a new song in children's church about goats on the mountain when Jesus was born.
 - 1. I hadn't heard that one before, so I asked him to sing it. He began, "Goats tell it on the mountain, over the hills and everywhere. Goats tell it on the mountain, that Jesus Christ is born."
 - 2. Not the usual words to that song, but according to our text, it's not bad theology
- A. If all of creation, including the sun, moon and stars
 - 1. The natural elements, wind and fire and snow and rain
 - a. Creatures of the sea and all manner of animals, both wild and tame
 - (1) As well as the hills and mountains on which they roam
 - 2. If everything the Psalmist lists is called upon to give praise to God
 - a. Then surely the goats on the mountains were doing their part
 - (1) In praising God for the birth of the Christ child
- A. And we, too, are invited to join in the great chorus of praise to the Lord
 - 1. For his name alone is exulted, his glory is above earth and heaven
 - a. He has raised up a horn of salvation for his people
- A. And in the days following the celebration of God's greatest gift to humankind
 - 1. Our response should surely be one of thanksgiving and praise
- A. But that is not always what we feel like doing right after Christmas
 - 1. A fellow by the name of Frank Harrington, tells about an uncle
 - a. Who must have grown up in south Missouri by the sound of his speech
 - 2. One of the things he would say is - "There ain't nothing as over as Christmas."
- A. What he meant was that when all the poinsettias are removed and all the candles are put away and the Christmas tree is taken down
 - 1. There is often a sense of emptiness, maybe a little bit like the feeling of a hangover
 - a. Although I can't really say about that
 - 2. The parties may go on for a few more days, New Year's Eve is just around the corner
 - a. But all the anticipation and waiting for Christmas to come is over now
 - (1) Soon, it's back to work or back to school, and that can be depressing

- A. I'm thinking it might not be such a bad idea to do as one couple I heard about
 - 1. As the wife was packing up Christmas decorations
 - a. For the husband to put away in the attic for another year
 - 2. When she came to the little nativity set on the fireplace mantle, she said –
 - a. Let's just leave it out this year. Sometime, when the world seems out of control and Christmas seems very far away, we can look at the mantel and remember that God is still with us and that He'll make good on His promise of peace.
 - 3. Christmas is a special time for those who celebrate the birth of the Messiah
 - a. But the message of hope and love doesn't end on December 26
- A. The Christmas season may come and go each year
 - 1. The shopping, decorating, food, family and festivity will soon become a memory
- A. But the true message of Christmas can have a long-lasting impact on our lives
 - 1. In fact, one reason that we celebrate Christmas is because the birth of Jesus
 - a. Has the power to change our lives forever
- A. There's a story that I ran across some years ago
 - 1. It's rather lengthy, but I like it as an illustration of the way
 - a. Change sometimes happens in people's lives for the simplest of reasons
- A. The story is called "The Luck of Roaring Camp" written by a fellow named Bret Harte
 - 1. According to Mr. Harte, Roaring Camp was the meanest, toughest mining town in the American West during the days of the gold rush. More murders, more thefts--it was a terrible place inhabited entirely by men, except for one woman who tried to serve them all. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She died while giving birth to a baby.
 - 2. Well, the men took that baby, and they put her in a box with some old rags for a blanket. When they looked at her, they decided that didn't look right, so they sent one of the men eighty miles to buy a rosewood cradle. He brought it back, and they put the rags and the baby in the rosewood cradle. But then the rags didn't look right there. So they sent another of their number to Sacramento, and he came back with some beautiful silk and lace blankets. And they put the baby, wrapped around with those blankets, in the rosewood cradle.
 - 3. That looked fine until someone happened to notice that the floor around the cradle was so filthy. So those hardened, tough men got down on their hands and knees, and with their calloused fingers they scrubbed that floor until it was very clean.

4. Of course, what that did was to make the walls and the ceiling and the dirty windows without curtains look absolutely terrible. So they washed down the walls and the ceiling, and they put curtains at the windows. And now things were beginning to look as they thought they should look. But of course, they had to give up a lot of their fighting, because the baby slept a lot, and babies can't sleep during a brawl.
 5. So the whole temperature of Roaring Camp seemed to go down. The men would take the baby out and set her by the entrance to the mine in her rosewood cradle so they could see her when they came up. Then somebody noticed what a dirty place that was, so they planted flowers, and they made a very nice garden there. It looked quite beautiful. And they would bring her shiny little stones and things that they would find in the mine. But when they would put their hands down next to hers, their hands looked so dirty. Pretty soon the general store was sold out of soap and shaving gear and perfume and all those things that the men had almost forgotten about.
 6. All because of a little baby that had come to live among them
- A. The birth of the baby Jesus has an even greater power to change our lives
 1. When we understand and believe that he came as almighty God
 - a. Bursting in to our world to show how much he loves and cares for us
 - A. Creation honors and praises its creator just by doing what it was designed to do
 1. But humans have been given a greater role, in that we are given a choice
 - a. The mountains and the forests and the creatures that live in them
 - (1) Tell of the greatness of God simply by being what they are
 - (a) Earth and nature living in an incredibly intricate, interwoven balance
 - b. The vastness of the universe speaks of God's amazing wisdom
 - (1) In creating order out of chaos, and beautiful light in the darkness of space
 2. But the star that led the wise men to Jesus, whether a natural or supernatural phenomena, as far as we know did not choose whether to play its part
 - a. It could respond to God's command, but not to God's love
 - A. We humans can honor God by simply being obedient to his commands, too
 1. But we can also choose to respond to God's love for us
 - a. Revealed down through the ages through the giving of the law
 - (1) Through the messages of the prophets
 - (a) Through the experiences of people of faith
 - b. And most fully, in God incarnate, Immanuel, God coming to live among us

2. Responding to that love gives us a whole different reason to praise him
 - a. And that, I believe, can be our response to Christmas
- A. The host of angels, who burst out in praise to God
1. As they announced the birth of the Messiah to shepherds out in the fields
 - a. Give us an example to follow in our praise to God
 2. Glory to God in the highest, they sang, and on earth peace, goodwill to all
 - a. They recognized, at least to some degree, what God was doing in the world
 - (1) And they marveled at the wonder of it all
 3. Almighty God, creator and ruler over everything, being born in a lowly manger
 - a. Such an act of love has never been seen before or since that time
 - (1) And the response of the angels was to sing and shout God's praise
- A. Max Lucado writes about it this way –
1. It was an ordinary night with ordinary sheep and ordinary shepherds. And were it not for a God who loves to hook an "extra" on the front of the ordinary, the night would have gone unnoticed. The sheep would have been forgotten, and the shepherds would have slept the night away.
 - a. But God dances amidst the common. And that night he did a waltz.
 2. The black sky exploded with brightness. ... Sheep that had been silent became a chorus of curiosity. One minute the shepherd was fast asleep, the next he was rubbing his eyes and staring into the face of an alien.
 - a. The night was ordinary no more.
 3. And Mr. Lucado adds this thought - The angels came in the night because that is when lights are best seen and that is when they are most needed. God comes into the commonplace of our lives for the same reason. (end quote)
- A. And the shepherds themselves followed the example of the angels
1. When they had gone into Bethlehem and seen the baby for themselves
 - a. Their immediate response to this gift of God's love
 - (1) Was to share the good news with everyone around them
 2. Scripture tells us that as they returned to their flocks and pasture, they were still -
 - a. "Glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen"
 - (1) Why should we do anything less?
- A. What we celebrate at Christmas is not the visit of jolly old St. Nicholas
1. We are celebrating the visit of God to this earth! That truly is worthy of our praise

- A. Christmas is often a time to feel good about things
 - 1. Although we recognize that for many people, life is not pleasant or peaceful
 - a. Regardless of our circumstances, we can choose what our response will be
- A. Well-known Christian author, Henri Nouwen, shares these thoughts with us –
 - 1. Songs, good feelings, beautiful liturgies, nice presents, big dinners, and many sweet words do not make Christmas. Christmas is saying "yes" to something beyond all emotions and feelings. Christmas is saying "yes" to a hope based on God's initiative, which has nothing to do with what I think or feel. Christmas is believing that the salvation of the world is God's work, and not mine.
 - a. And that plan for our salvation is even more wonderful
 - (1) Because it includes the story of a baby laying in a manger
- A. Christmas doesn't change the circumstances we may find ourselves in
 - 1. But it can change our perspective of our world
- A. That very first Christmas was God's work of love
 - 1. And God's work in the world, or his love for humankind
 - a. Has not stopped in the days, weeks or centuries following the birth of Jesus
- A. If we choose to accept and believe the message of that gift of love
 - 1. That we can be delivered from the power of sin through the power of the Holy Spirit
 - a. And from the guilt of our sinfulness through the blood of Jesus
 - (1) So that we can live in a close relationship with Almighty God
 - 2. Then our natural response to the celebration of the birth of Jesus
 - a. Is to give our praise and worship to the One who lives and reigns forever
 - (1) And to share the good news with everyone that we meet
 - b. We'll be looking at that some more over the next couple of weeks, Lord willing
- II. Most of us here this morning are not kings or princes or rulers of the earth
 - A. But we are among the young men and women, old and young people together
 - 1. So let us join with all of creation in giving praise to our God
 - A. Let us praise the name of our Lord, for his name alone is exalted
 - 1. His glory is above all earth and heaven
 - A. Let the people of God, the people of Sonnenberg Mennonite Church -
 - 1. Or wherever else you may be from this morning - Praise the Lord!
 - a. It seems like such a fitting response to Christmas