

1st Sunday after Christmas, December 30, 2007

Second Baptist Church, Lincoln, NE; Robert C. Molby, Interim Pastor

Isaiah 63:7-9, (NRSV) God's Mercy Remembered (O.T. Reading for Today)

⁷⁾ I will recount the gracious deeds of the Lord, the praiseworthy acts of the Lord, because of all that the Lord has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love.

⁸⁾ For he said, "Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely:" and he became their savior ⁹⁾ in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

TIME PASSES SO QUICKLY

Matthew 2:13-23, (NRSV) (Gospel for Today)

2:13-15, the Escape to Egypt

¹³⁾ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him." ¹⁴⁾ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵⁾ and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, "Out of Egypt I have called my son."

2:16-18, the Massacre of the Infants

¹⁶⁾ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷⁾ Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸⁾ A voice was heard in "Rama, wailing and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be consoled because they are no more."

2:19-23, the Return from Egypt

¹⁹⁾ When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰⁾ "Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead." ²¹⁾ Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²⁾ But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³⁾ There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, "He will be called a Nazorean."

When I took my training to be an intentional Interim Pastor I learned how to make a bird by folding a square paper. My room mate was a Presbyterian Japanese pastor approximately the same age as I. He grew up in Tokyo while my generation was bombing his country. I felt a little apprehension about that but he told me that he held no ill will toward me. He taught me how to make this bird and I have been making it ever since.

Today I have one with me that I have folded up to the finishing stages. All I have to do is finish it for you and this is how it is done. Some of you may do this much better than I but please indulge me for a little bit.

There, it is done, and the name of this bird is Time. Now, if everything works right you will see that time flies!

Two of our daughters and their families were at our house to celebrate Christmas. We videoed each one opening presents, especially the grandchildren. Eight years ago we did the same thing at our house so I found that video and we gathered around the TV to watch it. My how things have changed! We have a chart on the back of one of the doors of the house where the grandchildren have been measured over the years. In 1998 Lucas was 10 years old and 4' 10" tall. His latest measurement at 18 years of age shows him to be 6' 6 ½" tall. His brother, Nathan, was just learning to read 8 years ago and now he is a freshman in high school! All the other grandchildren show similar growth changes. We are not saying anything about the changes in the adults such as changes in weight and color of hair. The adults do not show the changes as much as the children do. Some of the older grandchildren were not there this year due to being out of the country and oh how we miss them! Time passes so quickly!

They grow up so fast, don't they? I know it's a cliché but one day our children are toddlers, walking around the house in feetie pajamas, spilling their milk and seemingly the next day, they're off to college. And it all happened so fast, we don't know where the years went. Time passes so quickly!

Here's a sidebar to you who are parents of little ones: the cliché is true. Be careful how you spend your time. Don't spend it all at the office, or on the phone, or even in the bleachers watching their games. Share the journey with your kids. Read them books, teach their church school classes, coach their soccer teams, and drive them to their friends' house. Because before you know it, they'll be grown up too. Every parent knows it true; every parent, even Mary and Joseph. Time passes so quickly!

But today, everything is different. We're still celebrating Christmas; we're still singing carols and basking in the glow of the Savior's birth, but Mary and Joseph are fleeing Bethlehem to protect their young son. We're still in awe of this baby king, but the principalities and powers of this world are threatened by him, and want to destroy him. And it only took six days! Let me explain how things changed so quickly for Baby Jesus, and how things have really not changed for us in 2000 years.

When Wise Men from the east noticed signs in the heavens that the Savior had been born, they made their way to Bethlehem, by way of Jerusalem. This is a story that we will focus on next week when we have an installation and dedication of officers and deacons. When they tell King Herod about the Savior's birth, Herod pretends to worship Jesus, too. "Hey, on your way back home, let me know the exact location so I can send a gift or something" were Herod's last words to the wise men.

And this is where today's gospel picks up. The wise men never do come back. In a dream, they find out that the baby's life was at risk, and they take a different route home. So Herod does a terrible thing: he has all the male infants in and around Bethlehem, killed. And just to be sure he gets the right one he kills all of them under the age of two, even one of his own sons. There was a saying around Jerusalem those days which said "In Herod's house, his pigs are safer than his children." So today, as we continue singing "Joy to the World" we read about children dying senselessly, and mothers weeping uncontrollably. And these verses, along with other verses in the bible that are almost too painful to read, have come to be known as "texts of terror."

Terrorism didn't get invented in the 21st century. Evil people have been perfecting that quality since they got tossed out of the Garden of Eden. Whenever there is an opportunity to stand in the way of peace, or work against love, or insult human dignity, evil people have found a way to do that. Herod the Great figured if he could eliminate a heavenly king at birth, the earthly kingdom would be his. Evil people dogged Jesus all the days of his life.

The dream that the wise men had was also had by Joseph, so he and Mary took their young son off to Egypt where he probably spent his formative years. Herod the Great ruled over Palestine under Roman rule from 39 BC to 4 BC. He died in 4 BC. Jesus could have been 5 years old when Herod the Great died. Probably another year passed before they got the news to come back to Judea. The news did not come by cell phone but by visits of an angel in a dream. On the way they learned that Archelaus was ruling over Judea. He was so bad that even Rome deposed him in 6 AD. Because of this Joseph decided to go to Galilee where

another Herod, a son of Herod the Great, was the governor. They settled in Nazareth, and this is where he grew up. But that happened quickly, too. One day, Jesus is laughing and playing a backyard game with his friends, and seemingly the next day, he was arguing with the Pharisees. One day he was learning the carpentry trade with Joseph, and not long after that, he was crucified. From wooden cradle to wooden cross in 33 short years. Time passes so quickly!

The year 2007 has passed so quickly. I can't imagine all the changes you have gone through here in 2nd Baptist Church during this time. Your Youth Intern took on a new job and left the church, your Associate Pastor had to resign for financial reasons and your Senior Pastor felt called to a new vocation, that of hospital chaplaincy. All of that happened in the 1st nine months of the year. You then elected a Search Committee and called me as your Interim. Time passes so quickly!

I came the 1st of October as your Interim Pastor and already three months have passed. You are searching to find a new pastor but you are also searching to find out who you are, what you believe and what God wants you to do. A part of that process is building a congregational profile so that you can present it to prospective candidates. As soon as that is done you will be working with Susan Gillies who will find profiles of prospective candidates that might match the needs for leadership you present as a congregation. These are very challenging times and time is passing so quickly!

I'm reminded of the little boy who was talking to God about time. He said, "God, what is a second like to you?" God replied, "Son, a second to me is like a thousand years to you." The boy thought about that for a moment and then he asked, "What is a million dollars like to you?" God replied, "A million dollars to me is like a penny to you." Again the boy thought about that and then he asked, "God, could I have a million dollars?" God said, "No problem; just a second!"

God has all the time of eternity but you and I on this earth do not have time like that. For us time passes so quickly. We say that some day we will look into what we believe, some day we will get our relationships with one another worked out, some day we will make a decision to accept Jesus into our lives and follow him as Lord and Master, some day we will pursue discovering what it is that God wants us to be and do. But, so far, we haven't done it. We didn't do it in 2007, or 2006 and here 2008 is upon us! How is 2008 going to be any different?

Time passes so quickly!

What is that verse in the Bible that speaks to us so strongly? Is it not 2 Corinthians 6:2 that says, "...now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!"

A fellow told me one time that there are only two times to plant a tree. One was ten years ago and the other is today! Since you didn't do it ten years ago, today, now, is the time!

Many will make resolutions for the New Year, perhaps the same ones that were made last year and the year before that. What will be different about them this year?

Let's think differently about resolutions this year! It's not much different in our day than it was in Jesus' day as far as violence is concerned. There are a lot of stories of suffering and pain we hear every day. In fact we are tired of seeing pictures of suffering and pain; we are weary with them, we have compassion fatigue. We've given as much as we can and there is still a need for more. As one person put it: "We've cried as much as we can cry, we've grieved as much as we can grieve. There's nothing left."

But there is. Because the Jesus who was born in a manger, and belittled by the religious purists, and hated by his adversaries, and abandoned by his friends; this Jesus came to prove that ultimately, love wins over evil. And apparently there was no other way to show this, except by the life he lived, and the life he gave.

We will leave this place in a few minutes, hopefully encouraged by understanding the purpose of Christmas. But we will go out into a world that is also weary from "compassion fatigue." Who will tell them that there is hope? Who will tell the world that cold, dark January will eventually give way to spring? Who will tell them that the birth of the Baby in Bethlehem was not the end of the story...it was just the beginning? Only those who know the news can tell the news. And the news is this: the Savior is born, and all is well. Thanks are to God! Amen.

Time passes so quickly. Let us no delay any longer in our search for salvation and God's will for our lives. You come as we sing our invitation song.