

“Special Placement”

Exodus 19: 3-6, I Thessalonians 5: 14-24, Numbers 27: 1-11

Sermon by Bonnie Stephens, Seminarian at Louisville Theological Seminary

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Good Morning! The circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus of Nazareth is something that we have been reading and singing about for the past four weeks. We sang about those special events again this morning. Now we are looking at a new year, so we're going to consider some ways that those events relate to our lives and our future. This morning I'd like to share with you some thoughts from a meditation by Anthony deMello called **The Advent**. Here's the beginning from the reading of The Advent:

“God chose the parents of his Son
and endowed them with the personality they needed
for the child that would be born.”

It's fascinating to think about all the special things that came together at the time of the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The time, the place, the people and the circumstances were selected as part of a Master plan for the incarnation of the Holy One: God with us.

The People

The covenant people were chosen, not because they were perfect, extra good, large and powerful, or a thriving civilization (like Egypt, for example). No, God told the covenant people in their earliest days that they were chosen because they were the “littlest” of the groups of people. And yet they were cared for so tenderly, as we read in Exodus this morning: God said to them, “I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to Myself.”

So, these people weren't extraordinary in any way, but they were given a treasure—the Word of God—to hear and regard and preserve and pass down so that others might also hear that Word. Just think what might have happened. These people whom God chose became financiers and watchmakers: what a perfect group of people to oversee the copying and recopying of the text! How fortunate all of us are that these people are known for being meticulous. What if they had been a careless group of people—like my ancestors? I tell people that my ancestors were the ones that Hadrian built the wall to protect the civilized people from.

The Place

Judea is “the place in between” three major powers of the known world at that time, and it was close to the Mediterranean Sea. The country was a crossroads, and the Kings Highway intersects it. It was then and continues to be a major trade route, and this situation would become really important in the coming years as people wanted to share the good news with others. From the ports near Judea people had access to all parts of Europe and Africa. What if Jesus had been born in the middle of a jungle or near the Arctic Circle?

Bethlehem is near the capital, Jerusalem, but far enough away to escape when Joseph discovers that the new child is in danger. They are close enough to Egypt to be able to make that journey with a young child. Then later, they return to Nazareth, another trade center in which people hear the news and spread it abroad.

The Time

What about the time that Jesus was born? The Romans were not the kindest people on earth—in fact they were the inventors of crucifixion as a method of execution—but they did use their power and cruelty to create a time peace in an area that had known little peace. Some Roman institutions were so effective that they were adopted by others; for example early Christians used councils—based on the Roman model—to make decisions, such as the one in Jerusalem in the first century allowing Gentiles to join the group.

The time in which Jesus was born is called the Pax Romana: the Roman Peace. There were no major wars and few skirmishes during this period: people were free to travel to Egypt and throughout the area. Think what would have been different if Jesus had been born during World War I—when the flu epidemic and endless battles brought so much death, destruction and chaos. Or it could have happened earlier, when it was almost impossible to make a long journey.

And there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus—and Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, where Micah had predicted that someone would arise.

Ever think about what would have happened if Jesus had been born at a different time or place? What if Jesus was born near here in the past year or two? For one thing, the Admitting Desk would have asked for medical insurance, and I understand that Joseph and Mary were poor folks. There would have been no shepherds abiding in the fields—except maybe in West Virginia or Texas: that would have been a trip! And what about the Wise Men? Being Persians they would have been stopped by Homeland Security and searched. And they probably would have spent the night in jail for bringing in frankincense and myrrh—which would have driven the drug-sniffing dogs crazy.

The Particulars

But no, God chose a man who loved and cared for his wife and new child: a man who listened to God and obeyed without question. Mary, too, was devoted to God, and she was young so that the childbirth would be easier (statistically, at least). There was a supportive family structure, as we can see when Mary went to visit her cousin Elizabeth.

Jesus was born in a stable: people of all races, areas, and economic levels are familiar with barns. Many authorities say that the stable was a cave: we have all seen a cave—even one large enough for a family to shelter in. Is there anyone here who has never in their lives seen a barn or a cave? Most of us—even us city folks—have actually walked into a barn. Most of us have explored a small cave. You can't say the same thing for palaces. Very few of us have ever even seen a palace up close. If our Savior had been

born in a palace, we could easily feel that we intimidated and estranged. No, Jesus had a lowly birth: Jesus is not too important for any of us to talk to him.

A wide range of people welcomed the new Christ Child into our world: the rich, the foreigners, the learned (wise men); the uneducated, the poor, the humble (shepherds), the old, the devout (Anna and Simeon); and Joseph was a tradesman. Jesus was seen by so many different kinds of people that *the story wouldn't be classified as a peasant legend or a philosophical myth.*

**The story is so detailed, it is believable.
The message is so simple, it can be understood by a child.**

What does this mean to me?

So, what does all this have to do with me? Have I got some good news for you!
Let's read a little more from The Advent:

“The events of history were controlled (selected)
for your coming to this world
no less than for the coming of the Savior.
The time had to be ripe, the place just right,
The circumstances ready before you could be born.”

When we meditate on this idea we can
“speak to God about the man and the woman
that were chosen to be our parents.”
We can each think about this idea
“until we see that they had to be the kind of
human beings they were if we were each to become
what God meant each of us to be.”

Think for a minute about your birth and your life. My guess is that your parents were not perfect. But I believe that they did provide something unique in your genes and the circumstances of your birth and upbringing that was essential to your becoming what God calls you to. It doesn't mean that you had to be loved. In the Joy Offering handout last week a story was featured about Grace, who was given by her mother to a doctor at the hospital in India where she was delivered, so that the mother wouldn't have to bring home a fifth daughter. And Grace was adopted by the Presbyterian doctor, loved, trained, and later became the wife of an Indian Presbyterian man.

Think about the time in which you live. What things have made it possible for you to be here today: medicine, time of war, children, wealth, poverty. If I had been born 200 years ago I would not have reached this age. I would have died in childbirth because Caesarian section wasn't even attempted until the late 1800's. Think of the medical procedures that you or one of your loved ones have undergone in your lifetime. What is routine now was unheard of only a few years ago. Even though your situation is *far from perfect*, think of the many *benefits* you have and *give thanks for God's grace to you every*

day. People today have amazing opportunities and technology is providing new frontiers. The time in which you live is a special time: just right for you.

The Meaning

So, what is the meaning of all this? Let's listen again to The Advent:

“The Christ child comes, like every other child,
to give the world a message.

What is the message that you have come to give?

Your destiny doesn't have to be wondrous or unusual—probably no one wrote a book about the special events of your birth—but everyone has a message. It could be something simple that you tell someone: you are a witness to many marvelous things. It could be something that you do, or something that happens to you.

Five Women Changing History

I'd like to share with you a story from the Bible that I had never noticed in all the times I've read the Bible. It's about five young women who weren't special in any way that we know of, but these five sisters got their names in the Bible four times! I don't have to tell you how rare it is to see a woman's name in the Bible, especially in a long list of genealogy, but Moses lists these girls in the census as the daughters of a man named Zelophahad, who was one of those brought out of Egypt. They are the only women listed there. We can tell that their story is very special because the writer of Numbers puts a bracket around the story to set it out from the rest of the text. By the way, the Hebrew name for this book is not Numbers but is far richer: *These Are the Names*.

Let's look in Numbers 27:1-11 to see why these young women's names are recorded among the *Names*. These sisters have experienced a tragedy! As you are probably aware women were not permitted to inherit property in ancient Israel. This was the case throughout the Near East at this time. In fact, women could not inherit property in the U.S. and Europe until well into the 19th or even the 20th century. And there are of course still countries where women cannot inherit, such as Togo in Africa. (I think.)

You would know nothing about them—they lived 3,000 years ago—if they had not experienced a tragedy. The tragedy that they have experienced is that their father had no son. As the tribes of Israel as waiting on the eastern shore of the Jordan, ready to go into the Promised Land and take it for their own, they are dividing up the land among the tribes. But these daughters of Zelophahad have no brother, so they have no inheritance. They can live with their uncles, of course, but neither they nor their children will have an inheritance in the new land, and they are distraught. This story of their appearance before Moses is fraught with anxiety. The last person who complained to Moses was struck dead for being a complainer, but they feel that their cause is just and their need is great. Here's the story: listen for the trauma.

[Read Numbers 27:1-11 from The Five Books of Moses, translated by Everett Fox]

“Now there came-near the daughters of Zelophahad, son of Hefer, son of Gil’ad,
 son Makhir, son of Menashe, of the clan of Menashe, son Joseph, and these are
 the names of his daughters: Mahla, No’a, Hogla, Milka, and Tirtza.
 They stood before Moses and before Eleazar, the priest,
 And before the leaders of the entire community,
 At the entrance to the Tent of Appointment, saying:
 Our father died in the wilderness.
 He was not in the midst of the community that came-together against God,
 in the community of Korah;
 Rather, for his own sin he died,
 And sons he did not have.
 Why should the name of our father be forgotten from the midst of his clan,
 just because he has no son?
 Give us a possession in the midst of our father’s brothers!
 Moses brought-near their case, before the presence of God.
 And God said to Moses, saying:
The daughters of Zelophahad are right !
 You are to **give, yes, give** them a hereditary holding in the midst of their father’s
 brothers;
 You are to transfer the inheritance of their father to them.
 And to the Children of Israel you are to speak, saying:
 Any-man, when he dies and a son he does not have,
 You are to transfer his inheritance to his daughter.
 And if he has no daughter,
 you are to give his inheritance to his brothers.
 And if he has no brothers,
 You are to give his inheritance to his father’s brothers.
 And if no brothers has his father,
 You are to give his inheritance to his kin that is nearest to him from his clan,
 And he is to take-possession of it;
 It shall be for the Children of Israel as a law of procedure, as God commanded
 Moses.

These five young women changed history by simply appealing to the authorities
 to ask God to provide for them and change the law. My favorite words in this story are
 God’s words: “These daughters of Zelophahad are RIGHT! GIVE, yes, give them an
 inheritance...”

What about you?

Is there something you have been denied? Have you talked to God about it? Have
 you questioned the authorities and the law about it? Remember, there was a time—not
 too long ago—when people who are handicapped were unable to enter some buildings.
 Things change, and you could be a part of the change. And sometimes the important task
 is to hold on when there is tremendous pressure to change. Only God knows which is
 which.

We can thank God for the marvelous wisdom expressed in the coming of our Lord on a certain location, in a certain era, in a certain way.

We can thank God for our birth—
even though our childhoods may not have been perfect.
Even though we may have experienced—
or continue to experience—real difficulties.
Even though we see serious problems in the world in which we live.

“Who knows?” Mordecai told his niece Esther, who saved her people in a brave act. “Who knows? Perhaps you have come” to this place *for such a time as this*.

What are the wrongs that you know about which need to be corrected in order to protect the poor, the widows, the orphans and the strangers (that is, people not like you?)

Begin with the advice we read this morning in the first letter to the Thessalonians:
“Admonish the idlers,
Encourage the fainthearted,
Help the weak,
Be patient with all of them.
See that none of you repays evil for evil,
But always seek to do good to one another and to all.
Rejoice always.
Pray without ceasing.
Give thanks in all circumstances
for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you.
Do not quench the Spirit.
Do not despise the words of the prophets,
but test everything.
Hold fast to what is good.
Abstain from every form of evil.
The God of peace, the Holy One, will sanctify you entirely,
And may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.
The one who calls you is faithful,
And the Holy One will do this.”

Wow! What a promise! So, what is so special about you? Why does the Creator and Guardian of the Universe make these wonderful promises to you—and the covenant people, who are learning to love one another? Here, again, are some words from the Book of the Covenant [Exodus 19: 3-6]

“You yourselves had seen how I dealt with Egypt,
and I carried you on wings of eagles and brought you to myself.
And now, listen, yes, listen to my voice and keep my covenant;
And you shall be for me a treasure above all peoples.

For mine is all the earth,
And you shall become to me a royal realm of priests, and a holy nation.

One of the things that the covenant people of ancient Israel did for future generations was to preserve the text of God's Word. Sometimes it's not what we say, but what we do that delivers our message. Or maybe it's just the way we live. Here is the end of The Advent:

“Finally I recall the song the angels sang when Christ was born.
They sang of peace and joy that gives God glory.
Have you ever heard the song the angels sang when you were born?
We can see with joy what has been done through our time on earth
To make the world a better place.”

All Rosa Parks did was to take a seat at the front.

All Martin Luther did was to make a list of questions.

All Mother Theresa did was to pick up people whom no one wanted to touch.

All you have to do is bear witness to what you have learned about God's love and plans for creation.

“Then we can hear the angels that sang
with joy at hearing about each of us.
We can join those angels in the song they sang
To celebrate our births.”

What were the angels singing when you were born?
Have you told your family or friends about the song you think the angels were singing when they were born? Would you like to do that this week?

Closing Prayer:

O Holy Child of Bethlehem
Descend to us, we pray
Cast out our sin and enter in
Be born in us today!
Amen