

This Thing That Has Happened

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Luke 2:8-15

I've been watching and reading a lot about the Copenhagen Conference this past week.

When it ended a few days ago most of the headlines read something like: 'Climate conference ends in discord.'

After getting leaders from all over the world to gather for a conversation about climate change, the end result seemed pretty disappointing. Whatever any of us might believe about the issue itself, it wasn't exactly encouraging to see the way the nations of the world got together for a discussion. The results ranged from hyper-bureaucratic legalese on one hand, to a shouting match on the other.

This morning I want to read you an account of a different gathering, with an entirely different impact on the world.

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

*14"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."*

15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one

another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

The shepherds would have been aware of the promises God made to his people. Promises for a Messiah who would come and make things right—make things just—restore the Shalom God intended from the beginning. They would have known that they didn't deserve God's grace, but they hoped for it anyway.

In the Old Testament we learn a lot about the way God responds to our sin and rebellion—we learn a lot that we tend to forget when we only read the New Testament books. Maybe that makes sense. We don't really like words like wrath and judgment, and yet they're an important part of how God interacts with his people.

It would be a mistake to say that wrath and judgment are the only way God deals with his children—that would be a distorted picture of the God we see in the Scriptures. But we also give an incomplete picture of God when we leave his judgment out.

As we worked through Paul's letter to the Romans this past fall we learned something about God's wrath. We didn't see God throwing lightning bolts or causing floods or wiping people out with his 'terrible swift sword.'

The wrath Paul talks about shows God taking a step back and letting things play out as we think we want them. He allows us to have what we think we want, and by doing that we create our own misery. God's wrath, when we think about it that way, comes when he pulls back—when he makes himself remote from us.

That's why the Christmas miracle matters so much. At Christmas we celebrate the way God enters into our lives through the birth of this one, single baby. We remember that this baby grew up to love and teach and serve and die for us—all of that was done here, on earth, close to us. The birth of Jesus is the opposite of wrath, because it represents the gift of Emmanuel, of God coming to be with us.

But why did he come?

That's what made me think of the Copenhagen conference this week. Saving the earth is one thing, and there's no doubt that important work has to be done to create a healthier balance between natural resources and human industry.

Saving the earth is one thing, but saving the world is another.

The gift of the Messiah offers healing and peace and restoration not just to the earth, not just to people, but to every level of God's creation.

We talked earlier this year about how the Atonement—God's work of reconciliation through Christ—the Atonement offers reconciliation for the relationships we have with God, with ourselves, with each other and with the earth.

That means that the gift of the Christ-child—the birth of Jesus Messiah—all of what we do at Christmas is a celebration of God's reconciling work at all levels—it's a celebration of what God has done not just to save the earth, but to save the world.

This past week Americans celebrated the anniversary of the ratification of the 13th amendment to the Constitution. Passed in December of 1865, the 13th Amendment made slavery illegal anywhere in the United States. Here's how the text of the amendment reads:

"Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

This was a huge step forward for the United States, which hadn't been all that united on the subject for years. At the end of a complicated and bloody Civil War, a war fought over national unity, to preserve a system of government that was still feeling its way, and also over the issue of slavery—at the end of that war the American states approved a law that made it illegal to own another person—to treat them as property.

But it's the little clause in the middle that we don't notice quite as much. Even after the amendment was passed, it was possible to force convicted criminals into

hard labor for a period of time—that's still the law today.

There's a huge difference between that and what God offers to us through the Messiah. The US made slavery illegal, unless you committed a crime, while God offers freedom and forgiveness and reconciliation and a fresh start, even though we've all committed sins—we've all done things that put a wedge between us and God.

The 13th amendment was a little like the Copenhagen conference. It offered limited solutions to a problem that was a lot bigger than that. The 13th Amendment made exceptions, and it didn't do anything about racism or hatred or even about the everyday injustices that make people feel as though they're still enslaved. Even if Copenhagen had accomplished everything its planners had dreamed, it still would have only given us tools for saving the earth.

It wouldn't have saved the world. It wouldn't have healed broken relationships and transformed the culture or offered hope and meaning for a life beyond this one.

That's what Jesus came to do. The Jesus we celebrate at Christmas heals our relationships and offers real hope for a hurting world.

When those shepherds met the angel of the Lord out there in the fields, remember what the angel said:

'Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy for all people.'

And after the rest of the promise was made and a heavenly choir sang the first true Christmas carol: 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to all people on whom his favor rests.'

When all of that was done, remember what the shepherds did?

They looked at each other and said: 'Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened.'

What could you see or experience this Christmas that would make you respond the

same way? What song could you hear or Scripture could you read or vision could you have—what would make you say, as if it were all unfolding for the first time, ‘Let’s go and see this thing that has happened’?

My prayer for all of us, as we make this final turn and head into the homestretch before Christmas—my prayer for us is that we can get a sense of just how huge a thing God accomplished in that tiny baby 2000 years ago.

The truth is there in one of the Christmas hymns we sing each year.

O little town of Bethlehem
How still we see thee lie.
Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
The silent stars go by.
Yet in thy dark streets shineth
The everlasting light.
The hopes and fears of all the years
Are met in thee tonight.

Whatever it means or ends up meaning for us to say that Christ came to save the world, somehow that promise is offered to all people in all places. ‘The hopes and fears of all the years are met’ in the Christ child.

If that’s news to you then find one of us and ask us to share the rest of the story with you.

If you’ve heard that a thousand times but it’s starting to get under your skin, don’t let another year go by without doing something about it.

The angels that spoke with those frightened shepherds are still singing that same song. Only now we get to sing it with them.

Let’s stand and sing together: ‘Hark! The Herald Angels Sing’