

Getting to the Manger

Genesis 18: 1-8; 19: 1-12

**First Presbyterian Church
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

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Our story this morning concerns the time when three mysterious, angel-like men appeared outside Abraham's tent. It involves Abraham's welcome of these men and their special revelation to him. Abraham learned two pieces of news. Within a year Sarah would conceive and give birth to the promised son. And, before that, judgment was soon coming on the city of Sodom, the very town where Abraham's nephew Lot lived. Our story involves the visit of these same angels to Sodom and the violent welcome they received. And, in the end it involves the LORD I AM's intent to create a particular people to bless the world, a people whose lives would be characterized by justice, righteousness and faith.

That's a big story. But to get to it, we have to start with another story. It's a story about a man who appears on the verge of Christmas every year. He throws cold water on your warm cup of wassail. He sends a stripe of fear shooting through your good cheer. He stands with his arms crossed between you and Christmas. Scowling, he declares, "If you want to see the baby, you have to come through me!"

I'm talking about John. Jesus' cousin. He later became known as John the Baptist. Because John got the people ready to receive Jesus as the Messiah. He called them to repent of their sins, and to get baptized in the River Jordan as a sign of dying to the old life and rising to the new life of people ready to receive the King.

For centuries, the people who belong to Jesus Christ have told the story of John the Baptist on this very Sunday. We are in the season of advent, a season of four Sundays where we prepare to celebrate the arrival of God in the flesh as he was born in Bethlehem. Today is the second Sunday of Advent. Around the world, Christians of all types are hearing the story of John the Baptist. Not as the baby who was just six months older than Jesus. But as the grown up man, the prophet out in the wild, eating locusts and dressing in burlap. The man who plants his feet and meets our gaze, then sneers, "If you want to see the baby this Christmas you have to come through me!"

Earlier this week, as our staff studied Scripture, our youth pastor Josh Maddin said, “People come at Christmas wondering if there is any hope. They’ve tried life their way, and it hasn’t worked too well. The world has not been kind. They want to know if God’s story, God’s plan can give them some hope.”

I asked a group of elders at a retreat recently, “For what are people casting their nets? When they come to your church, what do they want to snag and take home?” One of the elders answered, “They want to hear that everything is going to be all right. They want to know if they’re ok, and that it’s all going to be fine.”

Put those two together. People long for hope that life can be better than how it’s been working out. People want to know that it’s all going to be all right. They wonder if Jesus can do that for them. And if he can, will the church show them how to meet this Jesus? Even the most jaded and grizzled of us have memories of Christmas that still touch our hearts. We are drawn to the manger scene. We want to see the Christ Child. Can he give us hope? Can he make it all right?

We walk through the great doors on North Blvd. We come down the aisle. We see the Nativity scene and we move towards it. Suddenly a huge man with wild hair and a tangled beard, dressed in a rough robe, with fiery eyes and a booming voice steps between us and the manger. “If you want to see the baby, you have to get by me!”

A bunch of us just turn around. I don’t need this. I didn’t come here to take this trash. Come on, it’s just an hour til the Santa Brunch at the City Club. Let’s get out of here and go there. But another bunch of us are not so easily dissuaded. We’re a little mad, a little scared, and a little intrigued. Someone speaks up, “What do you mean, we have to get by you?”

John the wild Baptist speaks, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.”

What is this, a joke? Who talks like that anymore? Repent?! Are we not at 763 North Blvd?? But John is serious, deadly serious. Confess your sin. Cry for mercy. Turn away from yourself. Bear fruit in your life that shows you mean it. *Repent*. It means turn around. Turn from you to him. And don’t try to snow me. I can always tell. No repent, no baby. No repent, no Christmas. John the Baptist Grinch multiplied by big fat Scrooge if you ask me.

But this, dear ones, is Christian realism at its best. Each one of us has to decide, “Am I seeking the infant Jesus on my terms or his terms? Am I trying to get Jesus to be an accent on my life, to give me some hope while I figure things out? Or am I leaving it all at the door, willing to let him be the King and I’ll be the servant? Do I want God as a consumable item, something I can take or leave depending on my spiritual appetite? Or am I ready to fall down and worship him with all my heart, all my habits, all my wealth and all my life?” If you want life on your own, God will give it to you. But you’ll never see the baby in the manger, not really.

So let’s go back now to the Genesis story. Let’s compare two kinds of welcome that some mysterious visitors received. Abraham had his living quarters near a rare stand of trees in the desert. These were terebinth trees, and they look a lot like live oaks. What a mercy of shade they gave from the relentless sun. One hot afternoon, Abraham was nodding off at the entrance to his tent. The LORD I AM appeared to him. The invisible God made himself known in a form Abraham could recognize. The omnipotent Creator held back enough of his glory that Abraham was not incinerated by his holiness. But he showed enough of his holy self that Abraham knew who it was. How did the LORD appear to him? As three men. The LORD came to visit Abraham and Abraham saw three mysterious, angel-like men arrive. One God, three visitors. Don’t you think the scribes and rabbis pondered over that for centuries? And is it any surprise that for centuries the Church has labeled this scene as the Old Testament Trinity?

When Abraham saw these angelic men, he knew the LORD had come to him. The text tells us Abraham ran from his tent (Gen. 18: 2), something very undignified for a Middle Eastern patriarch to do. And then he bowed himself down to the ground. Basically, he fell on his face. “O Lord, if I have found favor in your sight, do not pass by your servant.” He urged them to sit under the terebinth trees. He brought water for their feet to be washed. He invited them to eat a “morsel” of bread, but then had Sarah mix up about 5 gallons of flour! He had a fattened calf slaughtered and cooked. As quickly as he could, Abraham set a feast before his guests. Abraham himself did not eat, but he served the meal to the visitors. These were signs of deep respect, true recognition of their exalted status, full hearted welcome and generous hospitality.

Now let’s contrast the welcome given when two of these angels journeyed further to the city of Sodom where Abraham’s nephew Lot lived. Like Abraham, Lot extended generous hospitality. He urged the angelic men to come inside his house for the night. They demurred and suggested they would just spend the night

in the town square. But Lot knew that was dangerous. He insisted they come in and he served them another feast. So far so good.

But before bedtime, “the men of Sodom, both young and old, all the people to the last man, surrounded the house. They called to Lot, ‘Where are the men who came to you tonight? Bring them out to us, that we may know them.’” When Abraham saw these angelic men, his impulse was to worship and to serve. When the men of Sodom saw these angelic men, they knew these men were not ordinary. They knew they were glorious. But their impulse was not to worship but to consume. Their desire was not to serve but to dominate. Like people stuck in a perpetual state of junior high school, they sexualized everything. Beauty must be for taking. Glory must be for possessing. What moves me must be for having sex. What is sacred must be profaned.

Lot was terrified. The men were under his roof and therefore under his protection. Lot knew they were angelic beings and he could not surrender them. What he did next was despicable. In his panic, Lot offered his daughters to the mob, if they would but turn away from the house. Thankfully, the crowd declined. Instead, they turned against Lot. These men trying to break into Lot’s house to rape his guests declared that Lot was being judgmental in not turning them over. That’s how low they had sunk. Give us your guests. Give us these angels. Let us dominate. Let us consume. Let us destroy. Or *you* are being judgmental!

In their frenzy, the men of Sodom rushed the door of Lot’s house. But here the angelic men intervened. They grabbed Lot and pulled him back into the house. They then struck with blindness the men rushing the door. The violent, overwhelming mob was suddenly helpless. These slathering butchers were groping helplessly for the door.

Man, they sure were bad. No wonder Sodom got destroyed. And good riddance! But wait a minute. John the Baptist is still scowling at me as I get ready to gaze wistfully at the lovely manger scene. “Do you think you’re any different?” he asks me. Memories rise up in me and I want to stuff them down but the Baptist seems to prevent it.

- Hurting my dog just to feel my own power over a creature that was loyal to me.
- Betraying someone who loved me because I lusted after someone else.
- Spending lavishly on myself while the bellies of children swell with hunger and disease.

- Manipulating others, like wife and children, so that I remain the center and the point of everything, not letting them live and grow and rejoice in their own lives.
- Being more interested in securing my own comfort and planning my personal entertainment than in serving the God who saved me.
- Wanting just a little bit more instead of giving thanks.
- Trying harder to be right than to be kind.
- Destroying others in my mind and sometimes with my words.
- Wanting God to serve *me*. Wanting God to fill *my* emptiness, *my* cravings, and *my* restless hunger without requiring anything. And feeling very, vigorously angry at anyone who would dare point out these truths about myself. Here's the fact. I am by nature a man of Sodom. I am by base impulse a consumer not a server. A destroyer not a giver. I am Sodom.

I look up at the man standing between me and the manger. He is still immovable. Fierce in his guarding. But there is a softening in those fiery eyes. His voice is a bit gentler.

“So, are you ready?” he asks. Something in me melts away.

“Yes,” I say, barely whispering. “I’m sorry. I am the man at Lot’s door shouting and pounding that my life should be served by God. That’s wrong. I’m sorry. I want to turn to God. If he would come to me, I would rush to bring water for his feet to welcome him. I would give the finest of all I have to celebrate him. I would bow to the ground and call him, “My Lord and my God!”

“OK,” he says. “But don’t just tell me. Tell him.” Suddenly John the Baptist vanishes, and there is a clear track to the manger. For a flash, I think “What about all these people here watching me? Maybe I could just smile at the manger and say, ‘Isn’t that pretty?’ Maybe I could just get away with this after all. Just go back to how things were and never come to this wretched place again.” The face of John the Baptist is seared into my mind. “If you want to see the baby, you have to get by me.” I know. And I do want to see the baby. With all my heart, I want to know the Christ child.

I fall on my face. “Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me, a sinner. Lord Jesus Christ, Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, have mercy on me a sinner. Lord. Jesus. Christ. Mercy!”

The words come to me then, on the floor, face down. Exposed and prostrate. “This saying is true and worthy of full acceptance, ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.’”

This vision of John the Baptist in our sanctuary is, of course, a fantasy. It is also Christian realism at its most real. Is there any hope for me? Will things be all right? By yourself? In a word, No. God will let you live your life on your own terms, treating him like a consumer option, figuring it all out on your own, doing what seems best to you. He’ll let you. But you will never know *him*. You will never have the Life that flows from the source of all life. And no, it will never be all right. In fact, after today, it will only be worse. That’s right. This is me telling you the truth.

The way to the manger is through repentance. Turn from self. Admit sin. Cry out for mercy. Ask for Christ to make your life how he wants it to be, to be Lord and God, Savior and Redeemer. Then you will get to see the baby in the manger. You will see that he came for you. He came into the world to save sinners. Not to save those who are all right in themselves, self-sufficient and self-directed. But sinners, of whom I am the foremost. So welcome him with all your heart. Give him the best. Host him as he comes to you in Holy Communion today.