

"The Bethlehem Candle"
Luke 2:1-7

December 12, 2012

2nd Advent Service

Our second candle for this evening is called the Bethlehem candle and symbolizes preparation. Many people today worry about preparing for Christmas – shopping for gifts, baking Christmas cookies, writing Christmas cards, going to many parties, and other holiday activities. We seem to start all of this earlier every year. Maybe someday we will be starting on the 4th of July. Yet we never seem to get fully prepared for all those Christmas activities. Do we even get ready for reason for Christmas – the birth of Jesus?

This is nothing new. Long ago, the world was not preparing itself for Jesus to come. Maybe that surprises you. Last week, we considered all of God's prophecies (promises) about the Savior's birth. The prophet MICAH even told the exact place where the Savior would be born: Bethlehem. But do you think Bethlehem was preparing for the Savior's birth? Not at all.

The people of Bethlehem were busy preparing for something else. The Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, ordered a census – a counting of all people in the empire. The government would do the census in a rather odd way: all people had to go to their family's home town. That meant Bethlehem would be very busy. Bethlehem was the home city for King David. Many people were descended from his family. Many people would be flocking to Bethlehem. Bethlehem had to prepare for these visitors -- making enough inn rooms, having enough food to sell, and so on. Bethlehem had no time to prepare for the Savior.

When the time *did* come for the Savior's birth, Bethlehem didn't even have room for this most important guest - the Savior of the world. Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem and found no rooms in the inn. The place was full. Mary was 9 months pregnant, yet no one would even give them a place to stay. Bethlehem and its people had no room for the Savior.

Even though people were not prepared, that did not mean God's promise would be broken. Joseph finally found a place for Mary to give birth - a stable. And it was here that the Savior for all mankind was born.

In a similar way, people today have "no room" for Jesus in their lives. Their lives are full. The good things in this life control them. The cares and worries in life control them. Sinful pleasures control them. People don't want to let Jesus in their lives. Following Jesus means a change in life style. Church members sometimes act the same. We will let religion into our lives because it seems comfortable and safe and we are in control of that. But actually maintaining a living relationship with the Savior is something we don't want to do. We have no room in our lives and our life styles for that.

How can we become prepared? Let's think about that 2nd candle again. The candle symbolizes preparation and is called the Bethlehem candle. But why? It doesn't make sense, does it? The people in Bethlehem did not prepare themselves for Jesus. So, why does the Bethlehem candle mean "preparation"? It is because God prepared Bethlehem for Jesus to come.

Think about that. The Old Testament prophesy about Jesus being born in Bethlehem was written by Micah was written 700 years before He was born. How did that happen? Micah was not smart enough to come up with that on his own. God led him to write that.

Mary and Joseph did not plan it for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth, their home town, about 60 miles north of Bethlehem. How would Jesus be born there? God prepared that. God influenced the Roman emperor to order a CENSUS – a counting of that people - so that Mary and Joseph would have to travel to Bethlehem.

When Mary and Joseph arrived at a full town, suppose they had to stay outside in the cold, what would happen when Mary gave birth? The baby would probably die. Yet they had a stable where they could stay warm. How did that happen? God prepared that. God influenced someone to feel compassion and allow Mary and Joseph to use their stable. So, really, Bethlehem was prepared

for the Savior to be born, not because of the people prepared themselves, but because God prepared everything for the Savior to be born.

God does the same for us today. We may not prepare ourselves for Jesus' coming, but God can prepare us. God has already done many wonderful things to prepare us. God has helped us to know Jesus Christ, our Savior, and what He has done for us. We know the cute Christmas story about the birth of a baby, and we also know what happened to this baby. He followed all the prophecies about the Savior. He obeyed God's Law perfectly for us. He took our sins upon Himself and suffered the punishment for our sins. He died on a cross to earn forgiveness for those sins. He became alive again to gain everlasting life for us.

He has prepared a new life for us when we were baptized. He maintains that life through the reading, hearing, and studying the Word of God. He strengthens that life when we eat His body and drink His blood in the Lord's Supper. God prepared all of that and chose you to receive it even before you were born and before He created the world.

And this is not just for us. He prepared men to write His Word so that the Good News could spread to the ends of the earth. He prepared preachers to preach that Word, beginning in "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." God prepared the people in America to bring the Word of God and preaching all the way out to Montana. God prepared people to build churches like this one so that people could hear His Word, be baptized, and receive Holy Communion. Then, when you were born, here or in some other place, God prepared all of these things to come together so that you would be prepared to receive this Savior born in Bethlehem.

I read a story about a Christmas pageant for children. One kind boy was chosen to play the innkeeper. The teacher worried about him messing up his lines because he was rather slow learner. Yet the teacher felt he could handle the part because he only had one line. When the boy playing Joseph and the girl playing Mary approached him, all he had to say was, "You must go. There is no

room in the inn." Rehearsals went well. Finally, the big night came for the performance. When the boy playing Joseph and the girl playing Mary came, the boy said his part, "You must go. There is no room in the inn." Mary and Joseph began to leave. As this slow, yet kind, boy saw that, he felt pity on them and tears began streaming down his face. He ran after Mary and Joseph and said, "Wait. Don't go. You can have my room." Although that boy changed the Christmas story, all the people watching felt that it was the best Christmas pageant ever.

As Christmas approaches again, so many things will fill your life so that you have no time, no energy, and no room to contemplate the profound mystery that has occurred: God become a human being, becomes like you, accepts your sin, and dies in your place so that you can become like God and live forever. Remember the young boy playing the part of an innkeeper as an example. When worldly things fill your life and attempt to send Jesus away, may the Holy Spirit help you to say, "Wait. Don't go. You have room here." A favorite Christmas hymn verse says, "Ah, dearest Jesus, holy Child, Make Thee a bed soft, undefiled Within my heart, that it may be a quiet chamber kept for Thee." This Christmas season, may God prepare us for Jesus to dwell with us, in us, and among us forever. AMEN