

“The Treasure God Left”

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7; Luke 2:1-16

First Sunday after Christmas: December 27, 2009

A homily preached by Rev. Dr. Ivan H.M. Peden Copyright: 2009, I. Peden

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For some Memorial Church families treasure during 2009 came in the form of babies – beautiful babies. For the Denton family, the treasure left by God with them was twins, Daelyn and Deacon, whose baptism we have celebrated this morning.

God is in the business of depositing treasure on the earth in unlikely places. One way to read the opening chapters of the Gospel of Luke is to imagine that God was searching for some place to leave a treasure. In God’s case the treasure was not gold, but the gospel. The treasure was not silver, but news...good news. Not cold cash, but the abiding promise that, when all is said and done, we are not alone ...that God is finally ‘God with us’ ... *Emmanuel* ...mysteriously at work in our world, setting things right. That’s the treasure! Despite so much human suffering that testifies otherwise – despite cancer, job layoffs, divorcing parents, wayward children . . . despite the death of a loved one – God is with us! And we know that one day all this suffering will cease. That’s the treasure!

Although the earth in recent years has been battered by crime, and bruised by violence and wars, there will come a time when swords will be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, when the lion will lie down with the lamb, and peace will flow like a river. That’s the treasure! The day is coming when justice will cover the earth like the sea . . . when empty barns, empty stomachs, and empty hearts will be filled with grain and honey, joy and hope . . . when the dark stains of human destruction will be bleached clean by the pure grace of God. That’s the treasure!

Where in the world do you leave a treasure like that . . . something so intangible, something more fragile than silver, and infinitely more precious than gold . . . a treasure able to be dismissed, rationalized, even crucified? Where do you leave a treasure like that so that it will be preserved, cherished, and allowed to grow? That’s what Luke wants to tell us. Luke wants to tell us the story of where God decided to leave the treasure.

Humanly speaking, it would have made a certain kind of sense for God to entrust the

treasure to so-called “movers and shakers” of the day—to the “Herods” of the world. God could have left the treasure with the politicians of the world who could have enacted legislation and tried to make the kingdom of God a reality. These are the powerful people of the world who command armies and provide social services for the care of the weak. Perhaps the Oval Office would have been the best place to come. But part of the treasure is that God is surprisingly at work in the world to pull those who think they have everything, and those who think they know everything, off their high horses, and to lift up those who hunger for food and thirst for justice. God did not deposit the treasure with King Herod or King David, or their modern day counterparts like Queen Elizabeth, or the President of the United States, or the Prime Minister of England.

What is even more surprising – and rather a slap in the face to those of us who are called “clergy” – is that God also avoided locating the treasure with the religious leaders of the day, the so-called “holy people” or clergy...like the equivalent of Pope Benedict XVI, the Archbishop of Canterbury, Mahatma Gandhi, Mother Teresa, the Ayatollah Khomeini, or the President of the Council of Bishops of the United Methodist Church. Instead, Luke shares this surprise with us ...that God left the treasure – God’s presence, God’s holiness ...not with a king, nor with a priest, but in the least likely of all places: God left the treasure in the womb of a teenage woman ... in a tiny babe born in a humble stable in an unknown and unremarkable town called Bethlehem! Why there? For many reasons, but surely one of the best must be that it was left where it would be best received and where life springs forth in the fullness of time – fragile and vulnerable – but full of potential.

If that is so, then as we apply this mysterious yet dynamic truth to our human lives, we realize it is those surprising, humble, and vulnerable places in our lives and in the life of the world that are most open to receiving the treasure of God. And part of the good news is that is precisely where God left the treasure, and where God will **always** leave the treasure called “Christ.”

God does not come to that arrogant part of us that swaggers through life, that over-confident and self-sufficient part, that arrogant, “I have it altogether” part of us. God does not come to the high and holy places, not the proud and proper places, of our lives, but rather

the lowly and less-than-perfect places. God seems to prefer to leave the treasure in the humble places where we know we cannot make it on our own . . . in the broken places where we depend on a miracle for healing . . . in the vulnerable places where we let down our guard. God in Christ does not come to us in that part of us which brushes aside all who threaten us. God in Christ comes to us in those rare moments when we transcend our own selfishness long enough to glimpse the needs of others and to feel those needs deeply enough to hunger and thirst for God to set it right.

On a dark night in a feed stall in Bethlehem God left the treasure . . . entrusted it to a maiden named Mary and Joseph, the man she was betrothed to . . . and that treasure became the treasure for us all. This divine stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are: empty-handed recipients of a gracious God, who, rather than leaving us to our own devices, gave us a baby, born in obscure Bethlehem and laid in a lowly manger. That's treasure!

Usually **we** look for treasure. That's not what the good news of God's grace is all about! Rather, the **treasure** I have been speaking about inevitably finds us. (*repeat*). The treasure found Mary. Mary did not find the treasure. The treasure found Joseph, the stunned fiancé of Mary. The treasure found the shepherds, not *vice versa*. The treasure found the wise men who were directed to it by a star.

That same treasure – the good news, Jesus, the Christ – finds our spirits, your spirit and my spirit – and infuses our spirits with grace. May it find us anew this morning in the music, in the prayers, in the carols, and in the scriptures. And if not in here, may the treasure find us as we leave this place to be servants of others – the aged, the sick, the needy, and the poor. May God leave the treasure, *Emmanuel*, “God with us,” in the most vulnerable, humble parts of our lives.

Then, may this treasure ...this holy presence of God, made real and tangible to us through the coming of Jesus Christ . . .this divine presence described as the “Word that became flesh and dwelt among us” ...may this miraculous and precious presence of God steady us in an uncertain world that is bent on war rather than peace, hate rather than love, too much rather than enough, complexity rather than simplicity, and grabbing rather than

giving. And as recipients of this treasure ...and as those who are steadied by this precious presence ...may we find ways and words to share this rich life in God's Spirit with others. Let us willingly and intentionally share the treasure God left with others.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. AMEN.