

Advent Urgency
Luke 2:13-16a
December 19, 2010

For the last few weeks when I have stood in the hallway shaking hands after the 10:50 service, I've greeted a very large, very tired but very beautiful Myra Trejo. She was coming to the end of her pregnancy, and little Xavier was weighing pretty heavy on Myra's 5'2" frame.

Last Sunday, as we hugged, she looked at me and said, "I can't wait!" There was an urgency in her voice that relayed she was SOOOO ready to give birth, to end the nights of tossing and turning, never finding a comfortable position in which to sleep, and the need to always know where the nearest restroom facilities were because of the baby's sudden movement. Talk about urgency!

Xavier made it into our world on Wed., December 15, weighing exactly 7 lbs—and none too soon for Myra.

Intro B: I suppose the fact that Myra's name can be transposed to also read Mary—and that Myra's husband, JoAndy, has sometimes been called Joe—and that they had a baby so close to December 25th—even though most scholars date the real birthdate of Jesus to another time of year altogether—I suppose all of these coincidences got me thinking about how the Holy Parents must have been feeling around the week before the birth of Jesus.

Joseph and Mary must have been SOOOO ready for Jesus to be born.

Can't you imagine that there was a heightened sense of urgency for the appearance of the baby whose conception had been announced by the angel Gabriel some 9 months previous? In addition, having to travel the last week before the baby was due had to have upped the level of urgency, especially for the mother who had to bear the burden of a baby in her womb.

Now even though I say "especially for the mother"—I need to stop here and say that Fathers, while not having the same type of physical urgency as mothers, still have their own sense of nervous anticipation they go through with an impending birth.

A friend of mine shared that when the due date approached for the birth of their first child, her husband became increasingly fidgety. One evening, she had some discomfort in her abdomen, but assured him that it was not serious. She was in the den, relaxing, when she heard him shaving. Then he began to throw on his clothes. 'What are you doing?' she asked.

"You can sit here if you want to,' he said, "but I'm going to the hospital!"

Intro C: There are some things we just can't wait for—an urgency for things to happen—and soon!

Kids know that feeling, especially on Christmas Eve, don't they?

Adults know that feeling when they're waiting to hear news from a doctor's office, or after an interview for a new job, or perhaps even during the evening news right before the lottery numbers are put on television.

It is with a sense of anxious immediacy that I want us to tap into this Sunday morning before Christmas as we think about the birth of the baby Jesus.

I. The Urgency of Christ's world: I invite us to contemplate what it meant specifically for the *Christ* Child to be born into the world—the urgency of the people in that place and time to have the Messiah finally come to make things right, to bring order to chaos.

A. It was a world in which the value of life was worth very little. Infant mortality was high—most children born to those in the largely peasant population didn't make it to their first year. On the other end of the lifeline, most people live to sometime in their 50's—60's if they were lucky—because of poor nutrition, 24/7 labor, and the lack of health care.

Add to that the crazy edict of Herod to kill boy children 2 years and younger (a horrible thing for a Jewish leader to order since it was reminiscent of a Pharaoh long before who had ordered the massacre of young male infants—a death which an infant named Moses escaped because of his deviously creative older sister, Miriam.)

In addition, the Holy Land suffered a high level of poverty due to the high taxation leveled upon it by the Roman government, which held it as a vassal state under martial law.

The Jewish people yearned for the Messiah to come and save the day for them with an urgency that we 21st century North Americans cannot quite grasp because our quality of life is so much different. Our lives are really, for the most part, pretty comfortable. As a whole, we don't have living conditions which we want to escape. Unless we have traveled to developing nations where we just might glimpsed a little of what those 1st century middle-easterners experienced, we really cannot understand the sense of urgency with which 1st century Judeo Christians waited for the Messiah.

They wanted Christ to come—pronto!

B. Scripture: That's why, when the angels appeared in the heavens singing to shepherds watching their flock by night, things began to happen. I know you've heard this scripture many times over the years we've celebrated Christmas, but let's hear it again, this time from The Message translation:

¹³⁻¹⁴At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:
Glory to God in the heavenly heights,
Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.

¹⁵⁻¹⁸As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running...."

Now friends, I know the average nativity scene always has a sheep or two in the mix that hearkens to the shepherds who seemed to have brought their work with them to see the baby Jesus. But let me remind us—herding sheep is not speedy business. Sheep are slow—some get distracted and leave the flock, so that the shepherd has to run after them.

What our scripture leads us to believe today is that after the angels appeared with their announcement of the Messiah's entry into the world, the

shepherds felt an urgency, dropped everything, and hurried off to see what they could see, to be a part of what their families had yearned for for generations.

They hurried to be a part of the biggest thing EVER, the realization of all their dreams, the answers to all their prayers.

They ran to see the transformation of their world—the salvation of their lives.

II. This morning's scripture raises the question for us all in this day and age: Do we have the same urgency for Jesus' appearance as did the shepherds that night long ago? Are we ready to drop everything we know and move with haste toward the Christ whose very existence can save our planet—can save our individual worlds? Do we even realize that our world has an urgent need to be saved still? Should one of our Christmas carols include the old rock group Foreigners refrain: Urgent, Urgent, Urgent, Urgent—Emergency! when considering the state of our world today?

A: Lori's story: Some of you have met my friend Lori Adams, who currently serves as the Interim President of Church Extension, one of the vital General Ministries of our denomination.

This past Wednesday I received an email from her in which she related an experience she encountered the day before—an experience that opened her eyes to Advent Urgency. She wrote, "Yesterday morning I came to work and parked in the garage next to the Disciples Center. It was four degrees out so I wanted to park close by. Coming into the stairwell I was stopped by police and escorted to the first floor by elevator. Turns out that a homeless woman had just been taken by the paramedics to the hospital after giving birth in the 2nd floor stairwell. She'd been in the stairwell trying to seek refuge from the cold.

"Of course, I thought of Christmas...about what it means for a baby to come into a world full of the kind of systemic sin that allows for poverty and mental illness and homelessness to go so unchecked [and unaided].

“On the way back to my car in the evening there were signs indicating that the stairwell was still shut off because of the blood left from the birth. The garage owners were having it “professionally cleaned.” Get rid of any reminder that we may be failing the ones we're called to serve! I'm very sad that we're so good at sanitizing Christmas.”

Lori's experience this past week reveals that even in our nation at this wonderful time of year, we still have an urgent need for Christ to return to our world. There is just as much need, just as much pain and disorder, and chaos in our day and age as there was in the 1st century A.D.

This urgency is part of what Advent prepares us to embrace—are we ready for what the Christ child was born to do? Are we ready to continue what the Christ-child started and we who call ourselves Disciples of Christ inherited as our job description as a part of the Body of Christ?

B. Response to Urgency: There are some people who have felt that urgent call to carry on—to bring Immanuel (God with us) into reality. Each time you walk into your neighborhood grocery store or Walgreens this time of year, you see a symbol of someone who felt that urgency and did something about it. William Booth was a Methodist minister preaching in London's East Side in the middle 1850's when he saw the abject poverty that drove hordes of men, women, and especially children to sleep under bridges or in alley ways. Instead of waiting for the Poor Laws of the time to address the needs of the masses, Booth felt an urgency to do something himself, so he ordered his son, Bramwell Booth, to buy an empty warehouse and convert it into a shelter.

His action led to hundreds of such shelters being set up in almost every major city around the world—now found in 122 countries, and is known by the red kettles and bell ringers as the Salvation Army. His sense of urgency has made life better for countless men, women, and children over the decades.

C. But Advent Urgency is more than just about what we can do ourselves. Advent urgency is ultimately about understanding what God has done for us by coming into the world—Incarnate; in the flesh.

One of my friends who understood this first hand was Ed Bentley, whose life we will celebrate tomorrow. Many of us have probably heard Ed tell his POW experience in World War II as a part of the 15th Air Force. On one of his missions flying over Romania in support of Russia, his plane lost their engines. Ed had to bail out over Yugoslavia and was captured by a group of Cheknicks. The Cheknicks actually sold Ed and two others to the Germans. He was transported to Stalag Luft III in Sagan, Germany. From there, during 5 degree weather, the entire camp of 10,000 Aussies, English, Canadians and Americans were placed aboard railcars, packed so closely they could barely move.

After several days they reached a stalag at Nuremburg, but they were allowed only a few days respite. From there they marched the group south toward Berchtesgaden and Hitler's Eagles Nest. Whenever Ed told this story he always teared up as he remembered his friends and fellow POWs who died along the way—starved, sick with dysentery, and simply exhausted.

They finally were diverted to a camp in Moosburg, Germany, where Ed tried to describe to me what deprivation really was. He weighed less than 100 lbs. Lice and meal worms were just a part of the daily experience.

He told about how the men lived in hope of rescue, but even so, day after day of captivity lulled them into thinking that this might be how they would live out what life they had left. Even after the war seemed to be changing in the Allies favor, little difference was seen in life behind barbed fences. The Red Cross rations which arrived went mainly to their German captors who were also starving because the shift in the war had cut off supplies.

In late April/early May of 1945, the war was ending in the European theatre but the prisoners were not yet released. However, on April 29th, 1945, Ed remembers hearing a sound of a plane overhead. It was an American piper cub which landed just outside the gates of the Moosburg camp. The POW's crowded the fence to see who it was, and Ed shared that one of his friends from Woodrow Wilson H.S. was standing closest to the fence. Ed heard a commotion that he later learned was the cutting of a hole in the fence, and then his friend led a man in full uniform, wearing the rank of Colonel on his sleeve, back to where Ed was in the pack of other barely living soldiers.

Ed looked up, and there was his father, Colonel Ed Bentley, walking toward him. He had been searching for his son after word of his capture months before, and had finally tracked him down to the Stalag at Moosburg.

Each time Ed told this story, he choked up at this point when he shared what it was like to see his father striding toward him. He could barely speak.

He didn't have to say that his father had saved him from that hell-hole of an existence. He didn't have to share any words that expressed that difference his life took from that point onward, when his father helped him return to a life that would later be filled with the blessing of a beautiful wife named Betty and three wonderful children and many grandchildren. Anyone who heard him tell this story knew how much his father's appearance in that place changed his life.

Because he knew the difference of what could have been and what he had been given, Ed always felt an urgent obligation to help make the world a better place for others. Tomorrow there'll be lots of stories about people whose lives had been touched by Ed gratitude.

But Ed's faith also understood something deeper than his personal experience mirrored for all of us. It's what Christmas is all about. We all have had a Father who came into world and saved us from the hell-holes of our making. We all still need a Father to come into the world again and save us from the messes we still get ourselves into.

The Advent Urgency we feel is for Christ to come again, through us, in us, in spite of us.

And so, in this last week before we celebrate Christmas, I invite us to open our hearts and minds to the urgency of the need for Christ to come again—for ourselves and for the world. I invite us to pray together each day this week, O come, O Come Emmanuel. We urgently wait for you to be born again.