

Date: June 27, 2010

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Title: “But”

The Message of Scripture (Sermon Thesis): The joyous birth of Jesus Christ

The Sharing of the Good News (The Sermon Purpose): God seeks to and will find a way to be with us no matter what is going on in the world – including a disastrous oil spill.

(Remember, it’s all about God!)

There’s a story told about a British preacher who came to visit the United States and preach in some churches. He had prepared a carefully thought out three point sermon on the subject of the word ‘but’ – with one t, that conjunction meaning “except” (Webster’s). However, no one had cautioned him that in America ‘butt’ – with two t’s, was a commonly used term meaning ‘backside’. So he is visiting his first church and embarks on the first point of his sermon, ‘Everyone has a but.’ He was a little bit confused by the congregation’s questioning response. Still undeterred, he carried on to his second point, ‘You can always see other people’s butts. Now the congregation seemed to be particularly restless and they clearly were not getting his argument. However, at this point there was nothing else to be done except to carry on to his third and most significant point, ‘You cannot easily see your own but’ ([www.goodpreacher](http://www.goodpreacher.com)), however, others can see it just fine. Following this preacher’s lead, we are going to take a look at a few “buts” today.

These butts belong to some of the characters in the Christmas story from Luke that we just read and heard. First is Joseph. Now while there is not much written about Joseph in Luke, when Luke is combined with Matthew, there are some things about Joseph we can know and some things we can assume. We do know that Joseph knew that he was of the lineage of David, and this was the family from whom the messiah was expected to come. Joseph also knew his fiancée was pregnant. What he found somewhat difficult to believe was that the father of the child was the Holy Spirit. Like a lot of people, Joseph was more than a

little concerned with the gossip in the village, at the shops, in the offices, on the workshop floor. It's not a nice situation to be in, to be planning to marry a young woman and suddenly to discover that she is expecting a baby, and knowing the baby isn't yours. Finding out the father is the Holy Spirit might be a load to carry. However, Joseph is a kind and good man, and doesn't get angry or humiliate Mary. How many of us would have been that generous? However, Joseph was a man with a very big 'but.' 'But what will people say?' he must have wondered to himself. He worked at squaring the situation in his own mind, but he struggled to see how others would deal with this very public issue.

Next we move to a character who doesn't appear in the scriptural story but who has become the stuff of every nativity play performed. I refer to the innkeeper. Luke gives us a simple line "she laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7b). Out of this line we have created endless sequences of grumpy innkeepers, menageries of farm animals, beds of straw, and donkeys. But the innkeeper, fictional or not, is a man we can all relate to. He is forever remembered as a man who was so preoccupied with the cares of his world that he had no room for Jesus. He is a man with a big but: 'But I'm just too busy to try and help'.

And from Matthew's version of the story there are the wise men. They are sages, magi, astrologers. They have been consulting the skies for a long time. They have a deep understanding of the mysteries of the universe. They have discovered a special star, a star that heralds the birth of a new king, a king whose influence

matters not just on earth but also in heaven. They travel afar, bearing gifts. Then they face a crisis of faith and wisdom. They assume that the king of the Jews must be born in Jerusalem. These are very clever, very courageous, and very patient men with their own big buts: 'But the Son of God can't be born in a stable in a small insignificant town' (www.goodpreacher.com).

So here are three characters that have buts we can plainly see: but what will people say, but I'm just too busy, and but this isn't the God I have expected.

Now there are other characters seeing things differently. Think about Mary. This must have been a terrifying time for her. Having a child is a daunting prospect at the best of times. Imagine being a young girl swept up into God's destiny and facing the misunderstanding of your whole community. Mary could have had lots of buts: "But I'm too young", "But I'm too scared", "But why me?" Mary left all the buts aside, and when Gabriel told her what God had in store, she simply responded, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord'.

Finally there are the shepherds. Of all the characters in the story, these might have had the biggest reason to share their but. The life of a shepherd was a hard one. Not only did they spend most of their life far from the comforts and company of home; even worse, the fact that they were incapable of keeping the ritual and dietary standards of the Jewish law meant that they were regarded as unclean and therefore outside God's favor. Out of all the characters in the Christmas story, they have not the slightest hint of a but. They don't say 'But we are only shepherds'. All they say is 'Let us go now and see this thing that has taken place'. They put

their livelihoods in danger by leaving their sheep in the field, and they put what little reputations they had in jeopardy by telling the whole community what they had heard and seen. For the shepherds, there is no but: instead celebration and thanksgiving. They act and live from their heart.

As we look at our lives on this Christmas in summer time day, and take away the wrapping paper of nostalgia and sentimentality, the question for us is, where do we fit into this story and perhaps even more important, right now how do we see this story playing out in our lives? Finally, do we have a but – but what will people say, but I'm just too busy, but this isn't the God I expected? Or are we like Mary or the shepherds, a little scared, although more eager and willing to respond to whatever new thing God has in store?

Working with this story and thinking about the powers of the ancient time as in the Roman authorities and Emperor Augustus who ordered the census because he wanted more money, I have been reminded about how the story might connect to the powers of the 21st Century. Money still rules. How often do we get news about the lists of the richest people in the world implying some sort of societal status and recognition with wealth? How often do we let news reports about sales and profits define the so called top companies of our nation? Even more specifically, what about oil companies? I remember a few years back when oil and gas prices had skyrocketed and ExxonMobil was highlighted because of their multi-million dollar quarterly profits.

Well now the oil company of the hour is British Petroleum, more commonly

known as BP. It has been made clear that this is a multi-billion dollar company. It's also one with a very big but. Report after report tells the story about this oil rig explosion, but it wasn't BP's fault so BP likes to say; there are reports why the leak occurred, but it wasn't BP's fault so BP likes to say; and we all wonder why the leak cannot be stopped, but it is not BP's fault, so BP likes to say. Yes, we can easily see they are a bunch of buts. Maybe that British preacher was a bit of a British prophet with his British thoughts about buts.

However we see other 'buts' with this ecological horror. The U.S. government wants to try and right the ship if you will, without having to take any blame for anything that has happened so we hear, "but we did and are doing all we can." There are other companies involved like Halliburton, "But don't blame us for anything that has gone wrong." And interestingly, there are the folks involved with furthering the development of off shore drilling, "But don't shut us down and put us out of business."

So the buts really seem to have it. As I shared with the church council two weeks ago, the one story I don't see reported on is how the responsibility for all of this mess falls on us. We are all called by God to care for God's creation. We are given dominion over creation. Over all the birds of the air – now oil soaked birds, fish of the sea – dolphins swimming through and dying because of oil and methane gas, and over every creeping thing upon the earth – those things that are creeping through oil soaked slogs. Now here comes the biggest but of all. We say it's not our fault it's BP's fault, it's the government's fault, and it's the off shore drilling

industry's fault. Wrong! The blame belongs to all of us. This catastrophe is caused because of our reliance on oil.

Just as I was getting completely disheartened about this lack of attention to God's creation and how we are falling short of caring for creation as we are called to do, CBS News comes along with a story about a girl who was so sick about the birds being covered in oil, that she wrote the Audubon Society and asked permission to draw pictures of birds and to sell those pictures on the internet. She was granted permission. Now her work brings attention to caring for creation and for the birds muddied by this murky oil flowing from the collapsed rig (CBS News). Here is one person saying, "It's not about what others have and haven't done, it's about the difference I can make." Like the shepherds of Luke's Christmas story, the efforts of this one girl come from her heart, albeit a broken heart, and what a gift as she shares her heart felt compassion.

Well the heart of the Christmas story is Immanuel, God with us. The good news of the Christmas story is that God finds a way to be with us even in the midst of our being tangled up in our butts. God found a way to be with Joseph by speaking to him in a dream. God found a way to be with the innkeeper by coming in the back door. God found a way to be with the wise men by sending them scurrying back to their books of prophecy (www.goodpreacher.com). God finds a way to be with us, through the life of a young girl centuries ago in the middle of man-made oppression, and now through the life of a young girl in the middle of a 21st Century man-made disaster. God still finds a way to be with us even when most

of us can only say “But...but...but.” God is with us – no matter what - and that is the good news of Christmas. And the good news of Christmas is good news for any day, any winter or summer day, and that certainly includes today. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. Let us pray.

Lord,

We do you give thanks that you find a way to enter our lives in love. That is the essence of Christmas celebrated in December or in June. With an unexpected grace you are present with us and we celebrate that presence right now. And we do so in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.

Offering: Christmas has become so much about gift giving. Let us share our gifts to the church right now. The ushers will please . . .

Dedication: God, we hope that you accept and bless these gifts and that they are shared with the world in love. This we pray, Amen.

Benediction: Go forth with good news of great joy for the whole world. God and sinners are reconciled in the name of Jesus Christ and so we are blessed. Go forth. Amen and Amen.

Sources:

CBS News; KCTV 5: Kansas City, MO; June 25, 2010.

Holy Bible – New Revised Standard Version; Harper Bibles: San Francisco; 2007.

Lectionary Homiletics; www.goodpreacher.com; 2010.

“Webster’s Dictionary”; P.S.I. & Associates: Miami, FL; 1987.