

STATIONS OF THE BIRTH:  
THE TEMPLE

Text: Luke 1:5-25

LHUMC 12/1/13

Advent 1

Stations of the Birth Series #1

- I. Introduction—Consider my role over the next few weeks as more of a tour guide than anything else. So in my best tour guide mode, here we go.
  - A. So...Imagine yourself in the Temple in Jerusalem. A little background:
    1. This is actually called Herod's Temple
    2. For it was King Herod the Great, the father of the more familiar Herod that we know from the Easter story, who began in about 20 BC to undertake the renovation and expansion of what is called the 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple, which was built beginning in 538 BC after the original Temple, usually called Solomon's Temple, was destroyed by the Babylonians about fifty years before that. So after the building had been here for 500 years, you would expect that it might need some work.
  - B. And Herod the Great spared no expense in his renovation project.
    1. Not because he was any great lover or advocate for the Jewish people.
    2. All he was trying to do, like the good Roman politician that he was, was to stay on the good side of them in order to keep the peace.
    3. And so if you were to go outside, you would see outside walls made of marble and covered with gold plates.
    4. And the effect must have been awe-inspiring. Here is how the great Jewish historian of the time, Josephus, described Herod's Temple: "It reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who tried to look at it had to turn away, as if they had looked straight at the sun...To approaching strangers it appeared in the distance like a mountain covered with snow." (Kind of a first-century Crystal Cathedral).
    5. On the inside, it wasn't all that different from what we are used to.
      - a) There is an altar up front called the incense altar, as we heard in Luke's story.
      - b) There is a place for musicians, and some kind of pulpit for whomever is speaking.
  - C. It is a place where all good Jews are expected to visit at least once a year, even in this time when the rise of the synagogue in cities and towns has made it possible for the faithful to attend worship in their own home towns.

- D. And it is a place served by members of the priestly families—men like Zechariah of the priestly clan of Abijah. A man who had married into the even more long-standing priestly family of Aaron when he married Elizabeth many years before. A priest marrying a daughter of priest.
- E. So picture yourself as a Jewish pilgrim.
  - 1. You have traveled a long way on your yearly pilgrimage to Jerusalem.
  - 2. It is first thing in the morning, and you are waiting outside the door for the incense candles to be lit.
  - 3. And today, it is Zechariah who has been appointed to light the candles. And understand, there were thousands of priests in the clan of Abijah, so this was a huge deal for him.
    - a) Actually, he has not so much been appointed for the job.
    - b) What has happened for the first and perhaps only time in his life he has just drawn the long straw in the daily drawing of lots to see which priest would get to light the incense candles at the beginning of the day before the doors were unlocked.
- F. And so he has to be thrilled—this is his major priestly moment. This is what members of Abijah’s clan live for. But as he comes through the door behind the altar, he can’t imagine what he is about to experience.
  - 1. Namely, an angel of God named Gabriel (who we will see again) makes an appearance—Telling him that his long-barren wife is about to become pregnant.
  - 2. And this will be a special child they are to have—one whom the angel says “will attain great stature with God” by getting the people ready for the Messiah who is to come.

II. So that is where we are, and what is about to happen. The question is, should we be surprised that the first station of the birth is in the Temple in Jerusalem?

- A. If you are even a casual reader of scriptures, particularly the Old Testament, you know the answer to that question is of course “no”.
  - 1. In fact, you could answer that question with another question—that question being “how could the story begin anywhere else but here?”
  - 2. And even beyond that, we probably could have begun the journey right here about 600 years or so earlier, when the prophet Isaiah and others standing in this very spot, began to have visions from God about a coming Messiah—one whom would come to beat swords into ploughshares and straighten out the crooked roads and level out the mountains and all the rest.

3. And more than any of the gospel writers, Luke understood and embraced the reality that both John the Baptist and Jesus were to be a part of that long line of prophets that served and preached in this place.
  4. For Luke in particular, the first station of the birth could have been nowhere else but here.
- B. So given the reality that the story had to start here, what do we make of that?
1. First, look forward a few years.
    - a) About thirty years from now, when Jesus begins his ministry, he will time and time again place himself squarely as a Jew in the Jewish tradition.
    - b) He will begin his first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Nazareth by opening the scroll to the words of Isaiah about a Messiah who will come to bring good news to the poor and freedom to the prisoners and says, “What I have just read has been fulfilled.”
    - c) A little later, he will remind his disciples that he has come to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.
    - d) And then at another point, he will lead some of his disciples up on a mountaintop where all of a sudden Moses and Elijah appear alongside of him, thus reminding the disciples not just who he was, but who he came from.
    - e) And you could say that his whole ministry will really be a journey back to Jerusalem, where it all began.
    - f) So basically, we have to be here today to start our journey, if we are going to understand who and what Jesus is to be when he eventually comes—a fulfillment of everything that this place stands for.
  2. How else is it important that we be here in this place this morning?
    - a) When the story begins in the Temple instead of the king’s palace or an army barracks, we understand that this is going to be a different kind of Messiah than what most people wanted or expected. Not a political or military ruler, but one who is placed down in the middle of the religious world.
    - b) And even more than that, to be in this place this morning reminds us that the whole story that we celebrate this time of year is a religious story, not a secular story.

- c) We are also not beginning this story in the mall parking lot—as much as our culture might try to make us believe that that is the place where the story resides.
- d) So the next time you hear “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus” playing over the loudspeakers at Meijers, remember that **our** first station of the story is the Temple in Jerusalem. That this is a religious journey, a journey of faith, that we are on that is far older, far bigger, far deeper, and far more important than the world might try to make us believe.
- e) It is a story that began far back in our own faith history, when a man, serving God in the way he was raised to do, received word from an angel that didn’t just change his and his wife’s world, but began a chain of events in a chain of places that we will be visiting—a chain of events that changed the world.

### III. Conclusion

- A. In the weeks to come, as we visit other places, far more common, everyday kind of places— we will see they were equally important in the story for other reasons.
- B. But today, we are here, where we worship every week. We are here in our own kind of temple, in our own sanctuary, where the journey begins for us.
- C. Not just the journey to the birth, but the journey to being more faithful each and every day in following the one who is to come.
- D. For us, we gather here every Sunday in what is for us the first station to our own new birth that happens every day through the love and care and nurture of God our creator, redeemer, and Holy Spirit.
- E. So today we give thanks for this journey to the birth that we have begun—both the birth of our Messiah, and the birth of our own greater commitment to him.
- F. And as we prepare now to gather at the table for communion, we recognize what the prophets in the Temple foretold, that this Messiah who came and who lived and died for us, is our Savior. He is the one who fulfilled God’s plan for us and for the world. In that Spirit, let us join now in an attitude of prayer.