

Lessons and Carols
December 13, 2009

I. Genesis 3:8-15

8 They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden at the time of the evening breeze, and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God among the trees of the garden. 9 But the Lord God called to the man, and said to him, "Where are you?" 10 He said, "I heard the sound of you in the garden, and I was afraid, because I was naked; and I hid myself." 11 He said, "Who told you that you were naked? Have you eaten from the tree of which I commanded you not to eat?" 12 The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me fruit from the tree, and I ate." 13 Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent tricked me, and I ate." 14 The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. 15 I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head, and you will strike his heel."

Why has there been no rain father? Mother, why is it that when you had the baby you screamed? Having no knowledge of science, the ancients believed that their behavior could control God. If they did what they were supposed to do, God would bless them and good things would happen. If they did not, rain might be withheld, the pain of childbirth could be overwhelming.

But sometimes the game seems rigged, and it is rigged against us such that at the end of the line, but early in the New Testament era, Paul would claim that "all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God."

The idea that no matter how hard we try, and some try very hard, we can never succeed, Take the "rich young ruler" of Luke 18, he came to Jesus believing himself worthy to become one of Jesus' disciples. When Jesus asked him if he obeyed the commandments, the fellow replied with some pride, "from my youth!" Of course he was proud. Wouldn't it be nice if you or I could make that claim? And yet Jesus said--essentially, You're not quite perfect, and proceeded to show him how he failed. We are left with the question, if he could not make it, what hope is there for us?

It seems impossible for us not to sin, and even the slightest misbehavior is enough to keep us estranged from God. It is the dark side of the atonement that drives many away from the faith. It is simply hard for many to accept the idea that there is still one thing lacking in us.

2. Genesis 22:15-18

15 The angel of the Lord called to Abraham a second time from heaven, 16 and said, "By myself I have sworn, says the Lord: Because you have done this, and have not withheld your son, your only son, 17 I will indeed bless you, and I will make your offspring as numerous as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of their enemies, 18 and by your offspring shall all the nations of the earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice."

The test of faith is the cruelest test. Abraham was commanded to take that which was second most

valuable to him and sacrifice it to the One who was most valuable. Anybody trying that today would be committed to a hospital for the criminally insane. It's right up there with, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away; it is better for you to lose one of your members than for your whole body to be thrown into hell."

In those days the understanding of God was different. It is hard for us to imagine the God so emphatically underscored by the life and ministry of Jesus commanding us to do such a horrifying thing, and yet, wasn't it Jesus who is credited with the words about how it is better for us to lose a part of our bodies than for our whole being to spend eternity in Hell.

We know of the grace of the ram caught in the bushes and the command not to kill Isaac, what we do not know is how many times similar events have happened throughout history where there was no ram, no apparent grace. No blessing from God. How often have we had such tests set before us? Never, never so bad as this, but how well have we done with lesser tests?

Perhaps the greatest test is whether or not we can sing this hymn, with a straight face.

3. Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

*2 The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness--
on them light has shined.*

*6 For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

*7 His authority shall grow continually,
and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom.
He will establish and uphold it
with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and forevermore.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.*

Darkness indeed, if you have been paying attention...
But the prophet spoke of light shining on a land of deep darkness,
And that can be any land, but not any light, for the light must be divine in origin
Still, is there any light that isn't?
Wasn't the first of God's creations light?
God hurling light into the empty cosmos and changing everything?

That mighty act was complimented by one that seems modest by comparison.
The creation of light was a grand, once and for all event
But babies are born everyday even under the most primitive conditions-- even today!
But there was no baby like this.

4. Micah 5:2-5a

2 But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah,

*who are one of the little clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to rule in Israel,
whose origin is from of old,
from ancient days.
Therefore he shall give them up until the time
when she who is in labor has brought forth;
then the rest of his kindred shall return
to the people of Israel.
4 And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD,
in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God.
And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great
to the ends of the earth;

5 and he shall be the one of peace.*

Another promise of a child, born out of modest clan of the greatest of the tribes of Israel. And the birth of that child is the answer to those most basic of human needs: peace and security. Micah told the location, somehow he knew. Later when the wicked king heard of the birth of a king of the Jews, he would inquire about the location so he too could worship him. We know it was a lie, but without knowing, and by giving up Bethlehem as the location of the birth centuries before it happened, Micah placed the baby Jesus in grave danger. Ironically, this passage would be used to create anything but peace and security as Matthew later reported the slaughter of the innocents.

5. Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." 29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. 33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." 34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. 36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

After Gabriel had finished his spiel, the young girl asked the obvious question. Sex has always been the minefield of culture and the practice of it has always been governed by strict rules and harsh penalties when those rules are transgressed. Mary was no fool, she lived in a land where crops and herds were the principal industry. She knew where babies came from and how they got there. She was a virgin, for her to transgress the rules could mean a painful death. And yet I have read that a certain amount of latitude was permitted among couples that were betrothed.

Perhaps more importantly is the knowledge that Mary was least qualified to be mother of the Messiah. The New Testament witness is uncertain whether it was her lineage or Joseph's that could be traced back to King David. Nevertheless, none of that is particularly important since Luke made the point he would make elsewhere, that, "Nothing is impossible with God."

6. Matthew 1:18-23

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

Joseph's Confession

One does not grow rich shaping cradles and forming caskets;
But I saved my money because I knew that the price would be high
For a girl who was old enough but had not yet been with a man.
And I paid it gladly knowing that in the years to come she would
Know no other man...

(I know it sounds odd to the modern ear, but *I suppose that* the times are different, yours and mine.)

When she told me she was pregnant I felt sorrow and anger.
And it wasn't easy having to listen to the remarks,
and the furtive winks at the shop and the snickering
I thought I always heard when my back was turned.

After she told me I wanted to lash out
But she was just a girl and in spite of everything--
she looked, well, innocent.

Back at the shop they acted like I'd invented some new sin
It's just that I hadn't laid a hand on her before she told me
But nobody believed me and I was too ashamed to explain it any other way.

So I wore this stupid smirk like, Yeah fellas, what can I say?
But inside I was dying.

Suddenly everything changed.

It must have been the angel.

I was amazed
And-- forgive me-- proud.

7. Luke 2:8-16

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

Just think about it; the Savior was born. The promised one who would save the people from their sins. The rigged "can't win," game had been turned into a "can't lose" game, and isn't it amazing that we have reduced this gift of God to the Christmas season?

"Glory to God in highest heaven, or wherever God dwells, in any and all places, shapes sizes, and yes, even names!"

8. Matthew 2:1-11

1 In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, 2 asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage." 3 When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: 6 'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.' "

7 Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. 8 Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage." 9 When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. 11 On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from When their king become frightened, then it was right that the rest would follow his lead. But centuries before, the prophet Samuel had been right. Kings had never been a good idea for Israel. I really can't think of a single one who was worthy of the name. If those wise men had been so wise shouldn't they have known that in going around asking about the one born "King of the Jews" would incite the fear of the current King of the Jews, one Herod?

Or maybe they didn't think that Herod would be threatened by a little baby, especially at his advanced age. But Herod didn't take competition lightly having killed his own sons when they threatened his rule. Well maybe they really did, or maybe it was just his paranoid imagination. Needless to say between Micah and the Magi, it's a miracle that Jesus survived his infancy, but then that's the whole point, isn't it, the

miracle of God's love for his disobedient people continues and trust, obey, believe and we cannot lose.

It answers the question, "What Child Is This?"

John 1:1-14

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

2 He was in the beginning with God.

3-4 All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.

7 He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.

8 He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

9 The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.

11 He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

12 But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God,

13 who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

14 And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

(I decided to let this text stand on its own without any exposition.)