**Round Top Church Christian Fellowship**

**Sermon**

***Merry Christmas***

 **December 23rd, In the Year of Our Lord 2018**

 **Pastor Matthew Diehl**

**(Unless otherwise noted, NAU text is quoted)**

 There are two times a year that the world stops and takes notice of something extraordinary, at least in the Western World. Resurrection day is in the Spring when we take time to observe the Cross and the sacrificial death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ. The Resurrection could not have taken place unless there had been a nativity scene. The birth of God in the flesh, and the world has never been the same.

So, we call this birthday, Christmas, the traditional birth date of Jesus Christ being December 25, 0000. Much study can be undertaken about the date, but the fact is that Jesus of Nazareth, of Bethlehem, the man from Galilee, born from the Virgin Mary by the seed of God was born. The God-child is raised in obscurity in the back-lands of the Roman empire. It was not until thirty years later did this God-child who had grown into a man walks into a Jewish synagogue in Nazareth and reads:

18 "THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,

 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD." (Luke 4:18-19)

This was the first self-proclaiming message the world heard from Jesus, God in the flesh. Here, Jesus claims to be God. True, there are a few statements from the boy-Jesus but not any coming-out statements. This passage in Luke is the coming-out declaration that God walks among men, and He is here to carry-out the mission of the Messiah.

Following the Gospel account of the birth of Christ, there are given genealogy lists in Matthew 1 and in Luke 3. From these lists, we can see a blood-line from Adam to Jesus. This shows purpose from God, in that He worked through the people named in the Bible to accomplish His redemptive plan. God is purposeful in His plan and actions.

**God’s Improbable Journey**

God selected a wandering Aramean (Abram) to father His chosen people. He produced Abram’s covenant heirs through an elderly wife (Sarah). But first, Abraham had to try his own plan and fathered an heir name Ishmael through his slave woman Hagar. God was still faithful to Abraham and caused elderly Sarah to birth Isaac. Isaac was rescued from the alter of sacrifice to continue the covenant. Isaac’s son, Jacob, was wrestled into God’s obedience to father Joseph who was sold into Egyptian slavery who later was worshipped by the very brothers who sold him. Through human bondage and a cast away infant, God selected Moses who had taken a man’s life to lead His people from national slavery, and, shortly thereafter, the people chose to worship a golden calf. The first king of Israel was a prideful self-indulgent man (Saul) who eventually lost his head and was replaced by a skinny Shepherd boy (David) who in-turn was a man of much bloodshed and an adulterous king whom God worked through but was denied the privilege to build a national temple. The string of depravity continued with the son of David, Solomon, who bound national treaties by hundreds of marriages and eventually worshiped pagan idols. The historical record continues with the same type of people being chosen by God to serve Him. The facts are, God works through the worst of human traits to accomplish His redemptive purpose. God the Father sent His Son, Jesus, to accomplish not only the gift of life to us but to overturn death with the gift of eternal life. A man miracle - No, but a God miracle.

**Psalm 118:14-22**

14 The LORD is my strength and song, And He has become my salvation.

 15 The sound of joyful shouting and salvation is in the tents of the righteous; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

 16 The right hand of the LORD is exalted; The right hand of the LORD does valiantly.

 17 I will not die, but live, And tell of the works of the LORD.

 18 The LORD has disciplined me severely, But He has not given me over to death.

 19 Open to me the gates of righteousness; I shall enter through them, I shall give thanks to the LORD.

 20 This is the gate of the LORD; The righteous will enter through it.

 21 I shall give thanks to You, for You have answered me, And You have become my salvation.

 22 The stone which the builders rejected Has become the chief corner *stone*.

**We celebrate Christmas past, present and future each year.**

Christmas Past: Creates in us the Christmas present. All the

 childhood memories we now bring to life in

 our own children and grandchildren, friends and

 neighbors we brought with us. With this bringing

forward, we hopefully learned from those lessons in life.

Christmas Present: We cast into the future the most cherished of

times that we celebrate now and the love that travels with it. What we do now makes our future.

Christmas Future: We hold our future now. We transcend God’s

 truth to our youth and non-believers now. If

the future is different from God’s Truth, it will not be because we did not witness the truth in God’s love. I really believe humanity could fall back into another Dark Age. This will only happen if the Church abandons its evangelical mission by not focusing on the core message of the Cross. **Sacrificial love and forgiveness**. Love of God over the desires of institutional religion. Pray that we hold on to these essentials of the Good News - Jesus did. Merry Christmas!

**Ephesians 4:1**

 **“Prisoner of Who?”**

 This time of year, we have a great opportunity to witness of whom we are a prisoner. Are we a prisoner of culture and capitalism? Or are we a prisoner of Christ? In our time, it is not uncommon to hear of people lining-up in the middle of the night at a retail store to get the latest technological gadget. Of what are they a prisoner? Of whom are they a prisoner?

In chapter four, Paul declares again his **prisoner-ship** under Jesus Christ. This is a continuum that Paul wishes to keep in the forefront of his audience. Of whom are you (we) a prisoner in our life?

This local church has in its marquee name, “Christian.” Are we

not declaring to the community that we are a group who is to be

under the teachings of The God/Man who lived 2000 years ago

and who is witnessing and living His Good News? It would be strange to this community or any other to have the marquee name “Prisoners of Christ.” We would be mocked as a cult or some other fringe group. However, this is a biblical concept put forth by an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul. Biblical teaching is foreign to many. We obviously do not want to appear unstable or unbalanced in our

witness. Thus, we use marquee names like “Christian Fellowship.”

However, the apostle Paul holds to this teaching about being a “Prisoner of Christ.” Prisoners are at the mercy of their keeper. Prisoners are fed, housed, clothed and constrained by their Guards. Prisoners are totally dependent on their keepers for their earthly existence. This focus places the idea of “Prisoner of Christ” in its proper light. It is most likely challenging for most of us to latterly think of ourselves as a person who is clothed, fed, housed and guarded by Christ. I was raised like many in a scientific tangible world. Yet, this is the teaching Paul puts forth. The question: Who sustains us more, us or Christ? It is true that we work for our support, but this material support would be useless if we had a void in our faith. Without the Spiritual faith, the material support would be worthless. We need a faith direction to know what to do with our materials we amass. For what then would be the value of the material support? We, who read the Bible, know the Lord asks us to store-up treasures in heaven.

**Matthew 6:19-24**

19 "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.

 20 "But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal;

 21 for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

 22 "The eye is the lamp of the body; so then if your eye is clear, your whole body will be full of light.

 23 "But if your eye is bad, your whole body will be full of darkness. If then the light that is in you is darkness, how great is the darkness!

 24 "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

 In our time of celebrating a capitalist-Christmas, it is a hard sell to children and young people that your love is tied to heavenly treasures. We have something more valuable to give than silver and gold. The power of the Gospel is transferred from faith to faith (Romans 1:16-17), from God’s faith in you to another: to your children, to your grandchildren, to your great-children and to others. What is the most precious gift Peter gives? It is what he possesses, and that is non-perishable.

 **Acts 3:1** Now Peter and John were going up to the temple at the ninth *hour*, the hour of prayer.

 2 And a man who had been lame from his mother's womb was being carried along, whom they used to set down every day at the gate of the temple which is called Beautiful, in order to beg alms of those who were entering the temple.

 3 When he saw Peter and John about to go into the temple, he *began* asking to receive alms.

 4 But Peter, along with John, fixed his gaze on him and said, "Look at us!"

 5 And he *began* to give them his attention, expecting to receive something from them.

 6 But Peter said, "I do not possess silver and gold, but what I do have I give to you: In the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene-- walk!"

 7 And seizing him by the right hand, he raised him up; and immediately his feet and his ankles were strengthened.

 8 With a leap he stood upright and *began* to walk; and he entered the temple with them, walking and leaping and praising God.

We have seen due to modern archeological findings that in ancient Egypt the rulers were buried with their earthly possessions that they would need in the life after death; this includes their servants, boats, grain and much more. These cultures missed the Truth. The next life is only spiritual; there isn’t any material. It is the Will of God’s Spirit that sustains us and unites us. No prisoner of the material world can be sustained in the next life. It is the Will of God’s Spirit dwelling within them now that carries them.

There isn’t any war that can be won on material equipment alone. There must be a united will to fight before the cause can be fought. In the wars America has fought such as WWII, our enemy depended on America not to have a cause to fight, because our national will was not united. But, under Presidents who openly seek God’s guidance, God’s enemies will be defeated. In our current war on terrorism, the enemy has propagandized this war as a “holy war”. This is true in the respect that the war is spiritual. We must seek the spiritual guidance of God in all conflicts in order to end them.

I believe that the point Paul makes about him being a prisoner to the Lord not only defines what supports us in this life but also the next. Again, earthly prisons are made of stone and steel, but these material prisons do not contain a Prisoner of the Resurrected Living Christ. Prisoners of Christ penetrate through walls of steel and stone into the minds, hearts and souls of humanity. You cannot constrain the Godly mission that empowers a Prisoner of Christ. If this world destroys the physical body of a Prisoner of Christ, that person will join Christ in the next life, and the earthly mission will be taken by another believer. The whole world witnessed this in the arrest, trial, execution, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of a man named Jesus 2000 years ago. Then Jesus’ disciples waited in the Upper Room for 50 days, and this same sustaining power of the Triune God came in the form of God’s Holy Spirit and empowered them to go and proclaim the Good News to all the nations, to all people the world over, Amen.

***So, this DIRECTIONAL INCARNATION by God has the intent of bringing Peace to you.***

 ***Peace to You***

***Once upon a late year’s night***

*A Child born in stable light*

*The Prince of Peace to pay sins price*

*Soon to be heavy burdened, but did not fright*

*For all the world awaits His might*

***Once upon a late year’s night***

*Could it be for us to see*

*The likeness of a true living-Light*

*All will perish - save not for this little one, bright one*

*To right the wrong, to pave the path,*

*To review one’s past, to set the righteous free,*

*To light “The Way” for us to stay*

*To stay on living through this day*

***Once upon a late year’s night***

*Come to the Child! The Father prays*

*His Light is bright*

*He sheds the darkness from your sight*

*No more tears, no more fright*

*His gift of love, forgives your plight*

*Perish we will, in life’s prideful fight*

*The Faithful seed calls the Lost*

*To the Cross that paid the cost*

*Born to bear the Cross*

***Once upon a late year’s night***

*“Ransom lives” - His birth call*

*Godly faith, walks on stormy lakes*

*Duty to all, to walk His wake*

*Call your neighbor to “The Light”*

*Their need for Grace is upon their face*

*Eyes that pierce through sinful past*

*No need to wait - don’t hesitate, nor be late*

*Know time will end at heaven’s gate*

*It is freedom to “The Light”*

*His calling waits*

***For He who was born upon a late year’s night***

*He, to embrace the world - The Forgiving Friend*

*To bridge sin’s rift - His saving gift*

*Ushered in, Once upon a late year’s night.*

*Matthew*

*December 2001, 2018*

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**Historical Notes:**

 So, each year we gather and pass the great tradition of celebrating the birth of Jesus to our children and grandchildren. I believe Christians should be informed about the Christmas

traditions passed to us. I thought everyone might find interesting some historical data regarding this tradition.

 In the Roman almanac, the first record of a feast celebration of the nativity of Jesus Christ was in 336 AD. The Roman emperor Constantine had converted to Christianity in 312. Malachi 4:2 was used to bridge the gap from paganism to the worship of the Son of God (Jesus Christ).

 Constantine was successful in converting the observance of two pagan celebrations. One was the winter solstice (Week of Dec.17) and the other marked the birth of the Iranian God “Mithra” the “Sun of Righteousness” or the Unconquered Sun on December 25, to become the anniversary date of the birth of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

 *"But for you who fear My name the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings; and you will go forth and skip about like calves from the stall.” Malachi 4:2*

 These Roman celebrations carried with them the tradition of giving gifts to children and the poor. The Roman practice of decorating with evergreen trees and branches was also incorporated into the Christian Church.

 Because of these non-Christian elements associated with December 25, the Protestant church in England and in the American colonies outlawed the celebration during the 1600’s. This ban did not last long. People continued to give gifts and eventually all the customs were in use again.

 I believe Christians should use spiritual discernment during this time of year. I refer to the scripture “*And we know that* ***God*** *causes* ***all things*** *to work together* ***for good*** *to those* ***who love God****, to those* ***who are called*** *according to* ***His purpose****. Romans 8:28*

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