

Upside Down Christmas

Jim Benedict – Union Bridge Church of the Brethren
Sermon for Christmas Eve 2008 Micah 5:2-5a, Luke 2:1-7

It didn't last, but a couple of years ago it was all the rage, as they say. Instead of the traditional tree firmly anchored to the floor, some folks were actually turning their trees upside down and suspending them from the ceiling. Proponents of the fad argued that there were several advantages to an upside down tree. First, you can get more and bigger presents under a tree hanging from the ceiling. Second, a tree hanging from the ceiling takes up less floor space, which can come in handy for those who live in smaller homes or apartments. And third, an upside down tree permits you to hang more of your favorite ornaments at eye level, rather than down near the floor where only toddlers and the family pet can really see them.

Upside down trees didn't last, but people are always trying to come up with something new for Christmas. People hope to come across something that will become a new tradition. But changing the existing tradition – the decor, menu and customs people have come to expect – is a great risk. People can get pretty heated when you mess with their traditions. In fact, one of the Christmas traditions is emphasizing the importance of tradition! Think of all those great animated Christmas specials we watch year after year – The Grinch, Frosty the Snowman, Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, Charlie Brown — what's the basis for those stories? Someone is out to ruin Christmas and to keep it from coming. All must be perfectly restored to order for the season to be valid. Tradition must be restored and preserved!

We pastors find this out soon enough. I heard a story about a colleague new to his congregation who carefully planned his first Christmas Eve service, and it all seemed to come off perfectly until he was standing at the door at the end and one man said, "Thanks for ruining Christmas. We always sing 'The First Noel' as the second hymn on Christmas Eve, and you didn't even put it anywhere on the program. Without 'The First Noel,' it's just not Christmas!"

Tradition, tradition, tradition – Christmas is steeped in it. Things are supposed to happen in a predictable, time-tested way, the way everybody expects and knows they will. And that's okay, I guess – as long as we remember, as part of our tradition, that the original Christmas was anything but what everybody expected.

Oh, the prophets had foretold it, as we saw in our reading from Micah:
“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.”

But that was a lot more obvious to most people after the fact than it was before. Bethlehem was just a little town on the distant outskirts of Jerusalem. The average person awaiting the coming Messiah wasn't constantly checking the birth announcements in the Bethlehem Times. Even Mary and Joseph probably didn't expect their child to be born in Bethlehem, since they lived in Nazareth. But Bethlehem it was. For that matter, nobody really had given much thought to a messiah who would come as an innocent and helpless infant and grow up to be a defenseless and non-violent prophet, or get himself crucified by the Romans. Tradition, inasmuch as there was one, was that the Messiah would come as a mighty warrior to lead the army of God's people in mortal combat with their Roman oppressors. And once the yoke of Rome was thrown off, that Messiah would be crowned king and actually sit on a throne in Jerusalem.

“One like David” is what everybody expected, and we all know David's story. David is the shepherd boy who steps up when the whole Israelite army is afraid and slays Goliath. David is the one who goes on to make his reputation by shedding a lot of blood, and who establishes himself in Jerusalem as a great king whose descendants come after him, one after another sitting on the throne of Judah for hundreds of years. That is kind of what folks were hoping for, but on the surface, about the only thing Jesus seems to have had in common with David is the fact that both were born in Bethlehem. David isn't a prophet – he needs a prophet, Nathan, to call him to repentance when he has wandered from the straight and narrow. David doesn't heal the sick or feed the hungry by miraculously multiplying bread. David doesn't spend a lot of time hanging out with the lowly and the forgotten. First, David is a friend of the king, Saul, and the king's son Jonathan. Then, once David is king, he surrounds himself with generals and wise advisors and people of prominence.

Jesus just wasn't what people were expecting, not at all. You might even say Jesus turned the expectations upside down. But Jesus turned out to be like David in one other important way, in addition to the fact that both were born in Bethlehem. The Bible describes David as “a man after

God's own heart." If anything, that is even more true of Jesus than it was of David. If you want to know what is in the heart of God, look at Jesus. Look at how he came, what he taught, how he acted, what he was willing to do and endure for the sake of others – for us.

“While they were there, the time came for her [Mary] to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” In order to show us that we are loved, God came to us in Jesus and shared our experience, all of it – helpless infancy, the trials and growth of childhood, learning a trade, making his way in the world. He experienced success and appreciation, rejection and betrayal. And he died. We die, so he died, so that we could know that he knows everything that we will ever have to go through.

When we come to church on Christmas Eve, we expect to see the place decorated, to see family and friends and some new faces, many dressed in their Christmas finery. We expect to hear scripture, sing familiar songs, light candles, pray. And we do all that. It happens, just the way we expect. But this Christmas, let's take a moment to remember that God sometimes surprises us, and that these surprises are very special. For Christmas, many of us make lists of the things that we would like to receive as gifts. Lists help our loved ones know what we would like. But, if you think about it, it can be disappointing somehow even if you get everything you put on your list. It is better if there is something, even one gift, that you didn't expect – one surprise. After all, as we know, Christmas is a celebration of God surprising the world with a messiah they didn't expect.

This Christmas and in the new year, may God fill your life with many happy surprises, and may those surprises draw you deeper into faith and faithfulness.

Amen.