

McCabe United Methodist Church
The Purpose of Christmas: A Time for Salvation (Part 3 of 4)
Luke 3:7-18: December 16, 2012
Pastor Rick Fossum

In 1865, on a Christmas Eve, Phillips Brooks visited Bethlehem. While he was there, he decided to take a little trip on horseback to a place called the '*shepherds' field*'. This is the field where people believe the angels sang to the shepherds announcing the birth of Christ. As Brooks was riding back to Bethlehem, that night, he looked at the little town in the distance and was inspired to write the Christmas carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. The carol was first sung at a Sunday School Christmas program in 1868. As you know, this Christmas carol is about Jesus' birth and it's about hope. It's about Emmanuel. It's about '*God with us*'.

Would you sing the first verse with me? You can find the carol on page 230.

And then there was John the Baptist. He didn't write any Christmas carols, but he is an important part of the Christmas story. He was quite the guy. In our reading today from Luke, you can almost hear him yelling at people, "**You brood of vipers,**" he yelled. "**Repent or else!**" He warned them that the "**ax is already at the root of the trees and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.**"

And then, after all the fire and brimstone stuff, the passage ends like this, "**And with many other words, John encouraged the people and preached the good news to them.**" If this was John's good news, I'd hate to hear his bad news.

John the Baptist reminds me of the angry football coach whose team was behind at halftime. He gathered all the players together in the locker room and yelled at them for not playing very well. On the way out of the locker room, one of the older football players said to a younger player, "**don't let it bother you. The coach yells at us because he wants us to be the best that we can be.**"

In his own harsh way, John the Baptist preached to people because he wanted them to be the best they could be.

This is the third message in a series of four based on Rick Warren's book called *The Purpose of Christmas*. Two weeks ago, we talked about the Christmas story in general. Last weekend Ray talked about Christmas as a time of celebration. Today, we'll take a look at Christmas as *A Time for Salvation*.

"When the right time finally came," Galatians 4:4, "God sent his own Son"

God sent his own Son for our salvation. This is the bottom line of Christmas. Someone once said, **“another name for salvation is freedom.”** Freedom from our sins. Freedom from the lives we’ve been living. Freedom to be the persons we were created to be.

A little three-year-old girl was sitting in a car with her father. It was hot outside. They were waiting for her mother to finish shopping. The little girl was strapped in the car seat in the back. She was getting more and more impatient as she waited in the heat while stuck in her car seat. Finally, she hung her head out the window and yelled, **“Please, God! Get me out of this!”**

The little girl was crying out for help. She couldn’t free herself. She needed someone bigger and more powerful to rescue her. She needed a Savior.

This was the predicament people were in about 2,000 years ago. They were stuck in their sins. They were stuck in their guilt. They were stuck in their fears and lies. They were stuck in their destructive habits. The common cry for people 2,000 years ago was similar to the little girl’s cry, **“Please, God! Get us out of this!”**

And God did. God freed us. God sent Jesus Christ into our world to free us from our sins that were separating us from God. And to free us from all those things that were keeping us from being the people God created us to be.

Listen again to the first verse of O Little Town of Bethlehem: O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by. Yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

This is why we remember and celebrate Christmas. God sent Jesus Christ into our world to be our Savior. To free us from our sins and to free us to live better lives.

A son sent his parents a microwave oven for Christmas. The parent’s were excited to get the microwave. They never owned one before. However, when the dad unpacked the microwave and plugged it in, the microwave didn’t work. He even read the directions and it still wouldn’t work. A few days later, the mother was visiting with some friends in her kitchen. She pointed to her new microwave which didn’t work and said, **“I give up. I can’t figure out how to make this thing work. I wish my son had come along with the gift to show me how to use it.”**

This is what God did. When God gave us the gift of salvation, he sent his Son to make it personal. From God to you and me.

Salvation is a gift and like all gifts, it's free. We just need to accept the gift. We need to take it, unwrap it and give thanks to God for Jesus Christ, our Emmanuel.

Today, as we head toward Christmas Day and the birth of Christ, we need to remember that the purpose of Christmas is about our salvation. It's about our freedom.

This is what Phillips Brooks had in mind when he wrote *O Little Town of Bethlehem*. As he was riding back to Bethlehem that one night, "he saw the hopes and fears of all the years, of all the people, are met in Christ tonight."

The gift of salvation is ours to receive. Today, I invite you to come forward to stand or kneel at the altar rail. It will be our way of honoring and praising God. Use this time to think about that night long ago and about the gift you were given. Emmanuel. God is with you. Come forward and use this time to receive God's gift of salvation. Receive God's freedom.

And then, please stand and join me in singing the carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.