

First Presbyterian Church, Spartanburg SC
Dr. David Renwick
December 24, 2006,
Christmas Eve, 11:00 PM

COMING TO SAVE
Matthew 1:18-25

In his book, No Pain, No Gain, Stanley Baldwin tells the story of Captain Allen Gardner. On December 17, 1850, Captain Gardner and six other missionaries landed on the southern most tip of South America in order to establish a mission place there from which they could spread out and teach the gospel of Jesus Christ to the inhabitants. Charles Darwin had passed that way 15-20 years before and had declared the inhabitants of that particular region of Patagonia as amongst the most primitive he had ever met. The very next day, the ship that had dropped them off, the Ocean Queen, headed back home to Europe, leaving the seven missionaries alone, with supplies for six months.

A few weeks later, the supporters of the mission back home in London, in line with the plan which they had from the beginning of the enterprise, began to look for another ship that would set sail for South America, carrying with it this time the next six months of supplies. They looked and looked. Week after week they looked for a ship that would take the risk of heading down to the southernmost tip of the Americas, but they could find no ship or captain that was willing to go. The months passed, and then finally they found a ship that was willing to sail. But when the ship eventually arrived it was October of the following year, 1851. It was four months too late. Captain Gardner and his team had long since died.

Imagine their plight. Put yourself in their shoes just for a minute. Day after day looking at the horizon, looking out to sea, hoping that a small vessel would come across the horizon and come to them: come with supplies for them, take a small risk on behalf of those who had taken a large one, come to save the lives of those whose very life was now quietly and painfully drifting away. But no one came. No one took the risk. Time went by. They were not saved. All alone without a savior.

When the angel came to Joseph to tell him that Mary was going to bear a child, the angel, if you remember from our scripture reading, gave Joseph no option as to what that child would be called, what the child's name would be: "*You shall call him Jesus,*" *the angel said ('Jesus' means God saves), "for he shall save his people from their sins."*

In a nutshell, the angel was telling Joseph not only *what* was about to happen ('Mary is going to have a child') but was telling Joseph *why* it was going to happen (telling Joseph that God was about to enter the world that first Christmas, that God was about to take a huge risk that first Christmas, that God was about to sail over the horizon into our lives that first Christmas, to come to us because he valued us and treasured us and because he knew that our lives were in great peril, great danger, because of our sin).

God entered the world that first Christmas to save us, to save us from at least three consequences of sin that every single one of us experiences:

- to save us from what we might call the grip of sin
- to save us from what we might call the gulf of sin
- to save us from what we might call the guilt of sin.

Each one of these is as deadly as the next, the guilt, the gulf, the grip. I would like us to think of them one by one. Let's begin with the issue of guilt.

THE GUILT OF SIN. Jesus came that first Christmas to save us from the guilt of sin -- that is from the effect of our disobedience to God. He came to save us from the fact that even though God has set his moral standards before us (we see them clearly in the commandment to love, and in the Ten Commandments, and in other commandments Jesus gives to us), even though we know what God wants us to do, nevertheless, every single one of us has fallen short of those standards, we have missed the mark – so that we are all guilty in the sight of a holy God and are worthy of God's judgement.

This is true whether we feel it or not. Before God our judge, we stand guilty. Though frequently in these days of pop psychology, we don't feel it!

- We don't feel it nearly as much as perhaps a generation ago when people heard "fire and brimstone sermons" every Sunday from the pulpit. We don't feel guilt in the same way, surely, as people did then.
- Or at least we don't feel quite as guilty or sinful as the person next to us (you don't need look at the person exactly next to you here!). That is, when we compare ourselves to other people most of us think, "Well you know we're not that bad. We'e doing just fine. We have our flaws, but we're fairly nice people. We come to church (indeed, we stayed up late to come to church on Christmas Eve! Here we are!). We love our family especially at this time of the year. We haven't stolen. We haven't lied. We haven't committed adultery, at least not recently, or at least not much, or at least not too badly. All things considered, hey, we've lived a pretty good life."

So that for many folks these days there just isn't a racking deep sense of guilt.

Though strangely, on the other hand, when we think about the issue more deeply, for other folks and perhaps for us from time to time, there's still plenty of guilt to go around, and at times the feeling of guilt is overwhelming. It may not be present with us as it used to be, but there may still be times when it is significant and won't easily go away. Some of those times are from what we might call 'real guilt' and some of those times are from what we might call 'imaginary guilt.'

Real guilt is the guilt we feel when we have done something that we wish we just hadn't done. A word comes out of our mouth. We hurt somebody. We do a deed. It hurts somebody. We reveal a secret and we could kick ourselves repeatedly for doing it, but once it's done we can't put it back in the box! What's done is done, and we feel the pain of that guilt.

And then there's the guilt that comes from those things that we haven't done that we ought to have done. We call these sins 'sins of omission.' If you read the Bible you'll find that Jesus points to those sins of omission again and again. Remember? He speaks of our need to clothe the naked, to feed the hungry, to care for those who are sick. To visit those who are in prison – and the list goes on and on. And there are times that we realize time has gone by and we haven't done half of what we needed to do, we haven't fulfilled the challenge that God sets before us in our Lord Jesus Christ . . . and the guilt hits hard. Real guilt. What we've done, and what we've left undone.

And then there's that guilt that comes when it is really not our fault at all. I call it 'imaginary,' but it's very real for us, and powerfully destructive, when we experience it. It's not something that comes as a result of our own fault.

- There's a guilt, for example, that we call 'survivor guilt': and some of you may have felt this at some time or another. Some of those who survived 9-11 felt and perhaps still feel this kind of guilt. Some of those who survive an illness that brings death to other people can feel this kind of guilt. They say, "Why me? Why am I alive? Why did things go my way? I didn't deserve it." There are some who find life really hard after such a traumatic event has struck others, yet they remain unscathed.
- Or then there is that awful guilt that comes to some people and it is truly no fault of theirs, when they have been abused, abused in childhood or abused within a marriage relationship and they suddenly get this feeling that it is their fault when it's not their fault at all. But the sense of guilt is strong and devastating in its power to wreak havoc in life, and at times it seems as if it will never go away.

In the end, the truth is that all of this guilt is caused by sin – if not our own, then someone else's – in one way, shape or form: sin, not just what we do, but sin that is part of the web of life within which we live, and of which we are a part. And, fairly or unfairly it strikes us in one way or another. And sometimes the burden of this guilt, even though at other times we don't feel it as heavy, sometimes it feels so heavy that we're not quite sure we can carry on.

Friends, whatever the source, whatever the blame, real or imaginary, know this, that Jesus came to save us from the guilt of sin, to carry that guilt in his body on the cross, to bear that guilt, and to throw it away into the depths of the sea, into the furthest reaches of hell so that we can be free, so that we can live an abundant life. And this is one reason why he came: "You shall call his name Jesus," the angel said to Joseph, "for he shall save his people from their sin."

THE GULF OF SIN. Jesus came to save us from the guilt of sin, but not just the guilt of sin, but save us also from the gulf that sin causes, from the separation that sin causes between us and God, between us and the one for whom we were made and in whom we live and move and have our being.

Isaiah chapter 59, verse 2, says that our sin has made a separation between us and our God: our sin tears us apart, breaches the relationship between us and God. And sin

not only does that, but it affects all of our relationships, so that our relationships with others are often twisted and turned, and not as they ought to be. Saint Augustine perhaps says this best. He says of God, *“You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until we find our rest in thee.”*

Think a moment of your life and your relationships. Is there a relationship in your life that is broken or twisted or painful? Perhaps it is with a parent or with a child or with a sibling or with a colleague. Some of the pain that comes from broken or twisted relationships is amongst the deepest pain that we can ever feel. Jesus came into this world to close the gap, to bridge the gulf between us and those whom we want to love – but between us there is something wrong, there is a seemingly unbridgeable divide.

There is a Spanish story of a father and a son who had become estranged. The son ran away and the father set off to find him. He searched for months to no avail. Finally in a last desperate effort to find him, the father put an ad in a newspaper in Madrid, and the ad read like this: *“Dear Paco. Meet me in front of this newspaper office at noon on Saturday. All is forgiven. I love you. Your father.”* That Saturday, outside the newspaper office 800 Paco’s turned up, each seeking a father from whom they had been estranged!

How deep the pain can be.

Jesus’ birth was God’s act, his advertisement in the paper, saying that before we come back to him he has already come to us, moved toward us in sovereign grace, moved toward us when we could not, or would not, move toward him, moved toward us to bridge the gulf caused by our sin, actions in which again and again we have turned our back on God. Jesus came for that.

Jesus came to save us from our sins the angel said to Joseph not just from the guilt of sin and not just from the gulf caused by sin between us and our God but he came in the third place to save us from what we might call the grip of sin as well.

THE GRIP OF SIN. Jesus came to save us from the power of sin to destroy us. From the power of sin to destroy others: to ruin us, to ruin society, to ruin the world. He came to help us, and to use us, to break the destructive cycles caused by sin within our individual lives and within society as a whole, whether these cycles are cycles of violence or of addiction or of injustice or of poverty or of lovelessness.

Jesus came to save us sometimes simply by driving us to our knees. Sometimes simply by pushing us to our wits end. So, we find ourselves, for example, addicted, for perhaps to drugs, or perhaps to alcohol . . . we just want that extra drink, only to find that ‘want’ turns into ‘have to’: we ‘have to’ take it again and again; we cannot stop – we’re addicted! Us! And we find that Christ the Savior is the one who does not give up on us, but pursues us, until we drop on our knees, until we finally admit that we are powerless over this new power that is controlling our lives. And on our knees we finally we say, *“Lord I need your power, a higher power than my own. I need you, Jesus, to help me. I need the strong fellowship of your community around me if I am to be someone other*

than the person I have become, in order to change my life. I cannot do it on my own, so be my savior, be my helper, deliver me from the grip of sin.”

At first, sometimes when we seek release from the grip of sin, it seems that this Jesus is our enemy, that he wants to embarrass us, put us to shame. But what we discover is that he never comes to embarrass us or to put us to shame. He comes as our friend to heal, to save from the grip of sin. *Sometimes by driving us to our knees, to our wits end, and sometimes just by helping us to see that there are different choices to make in this world when we think that there is only one choice.* Sometimes these alternative choices are hard, but sometimes they are not hard at all – they just don’t enter our mind naturally . . . at first – and Jesus presents us with the ‘new way.’

About ten years ago, Ruby Hewett found this out. She was a post office clerk in Indianapolis (and perhaps she still is!). At that time about ten years ago, a newspaper editorial was run in the Indianapolis paper reporting on a survey about different post office branches and her post office branch won the award for being the rudest branch with the rudest clerks in all of Indianapolis and this is how she writes the story about discovering that. She begins the story like this:

“Mr. G. a regular approached my window at the Bacon Station post office. Other clerks usually slowed down their transactions or closed their windows looking for any excuse to duck him when he turned up. This morning I was ready for him. ‘Give me a book of stamps,’ Mr. G. snapped at me. He slammed his money down. ‘And hurry up.’ I gave that man a look he’d never forget and I took my sweet time handing him those stamps too.

I had had it with nasty customers. I wished I had my old job back sorting flat mail at the main post office. It was monotonous work but at least I didn’t get any lip from the public. Just that morning over coffee, a newspaper editorial had caught my eye. Bacon Station has the rudest clerks in town it charged. No I corrected. Bacon Station has the rudest customers anywhere. I was rude to people because they were rude to me. Mr. G. had asked for the look that I’d given him.

And then it dawned on me. If I answered rudeness with rudeness, how would others respond if I treated them with courtesy? [Jesus said, ‘Do unto others as you would have them do to you.’] And so I prayed, ‘Lord I am going to need your help to make this work.’

My first customer looked glum. While digging in her purse for her wallet, she mumbled her order. I felt awkward but when she looked up to pay, I forced a smile. One side of her mouth curled up slightly and I said to myself ‘She is trying too.’

For the rest of the week, I concentrated on getting to know my customers, addressing them by name when I could and thinking of them as people just like me with problems and worries and good news and bad. By Friday, the smile on my face had become genuine. I felt better and then I saw Mr. G. in line, a true test.

He walked up to my window and barked his order and while handling the transaction I said ‘How is business, Mr. G.?’ He looked startled. ‘Terrible’ he growled. I placed his order on the counter. ‘It’ll get better’ I said smiling. He grumbled and walked away but I saw him glance back over his shoulder [as if to say ‘What’s wrong with her?!’]

Slowly Mr. G. began to change and so did the clerks. A new mood of cheerfulness seems to pervade Bacon Station and Mr. G. became one of our favorite customers. In trying our best to live the Golden Rule on the job, I learned that it is not only the customers who are being better served but it is all of us.” (Guideposts, 1995?)

All of us! Isn't that the way we all want it to be?

“You shall name him Jesus,” said the angel to Joseph “for he shall save his people from their sins.” That is why Jesus came that first Christmas. He came to save us.

- He came to help us break free from the grip of sin in our lives and to use us to help others to break free from the grip of sin within their lives as well.
- He came to bridge the gulf that our sin has caused between us and God our maker, between us and one another. We were made for that relationship, to be the heart and the core of our lives, and he came to us before we turned to him in order to bridge that gulf.
- He came to save us from our sin by removing all of the guilt of sin which leads to death, wherever it is from, whether we feel it or not, whether we are in bondage to it or not, whether it is real or imaginary, whether it is our own fault or someone else's. He came to wipe it off of the slate and take it away from us.

From all of the entangled web of brokenness, he came to save us that first Christmas.

You know he didn't have to do it. He really didn't have to do it.

- He could have said “It's not worth it.” He could have said that the risk is too great – like the ships that never appeared over the South American horizon.
- He could have said, “I just can't be bothered. I really cannot be bothered to become a baby, and grow up to be a man, and then be rejected and crucified on a cross.”
- He could have said that we are not valuable enough and just never turned up.

But he didn't.

He said instead, “You are valuable enough, each one of you. And for you I'll do it.”

“You shall call him Jesus for he shall save his people (you and me, saved in every conceivable way) from our sins.”