

12-22-19 SERMON CCI Matthew 1: 18- 25 Jesus, God's Treasure?

I recently read someone's description of an old game from their childhood called Where Would You Leave the Treasure? The game went like this: A child would imagine they had a treasure of a large amount of money and some crisis has come up, so they need to leave their treasure with someone for safekeeping. They can't put it in the bank, or bury it. The rule of the game was they had to leave it with someone they trust. Whom would they choose? The fun of the game was sitting around in a circle, and examining the virtues and flaws of possible trustworthy people. The writer said the following were common:

"How about the school principal?"

"Nah, he'd probably steal it." (So much for trusting the school principal.)

"Well, how about the preacher?"

"Too risky. He'd probably put it in the offering plate." (I guess you can't trust me either)

"Okay, what about your sister?"

"Are you crazy? She'd want me to split it with her!"

On and on the kids would go, looking for a trustworthy person to guard their treasure.

One way to read the first 2 chapters of Luke is as a divine version of "Where Would You Leave the Treasure?" God had a treasure, but it wasn't gold or silver, or cash; it was good news of the deep and abiding promise that God would soon be Emmanuel, God-with-us. That's the treasure. That despite the evidence of never-ending brokenness and betrayal we see around us, there is coming a time, like we heard the prophets say earlier this month when swords will be beaten into plowshares and we won't study war no more. A time when the hungry and poor will have all they need, the wolf will lay down with the lamb, and arrogant powers will be brought down and the humble raised. Even in our day, God's treasure is really good news. God-with-us and all that means for our world.

Where do you leave a treasure like that?

Luke mentions several places where God could have left his treasure. Luke starts Jesus' story with: "In the time of Herod, king of Judea." Herod was the Roman king ruling over the nation of Israel after they had been conquered by the Roman Empire. Who has more power to protect God's treasure than the king? Herod could use the riches of his kingdom to build a shrine or a cathedral for God's treasure and he could assign his armies to keep guard around the clock. Surely God's treasure could be safe with Herod.

But we know the story of Herod. Herod was a powerful king. His word was absolute law. As Catholic historian, Sir John Dalberg-Acton, said in 1887, "**Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.**" It was certainly true about Herod, and it is still true in our day. People with the most power tend to fear power in others, and work to destroy it. The more power given to them or taken by them, the more corrupt and dangerous they become. And indeed, when the wise men came to Jerusalem to worship Israel's newborn king, they made an agreement to tell Herod where they find him, but God warned them in a dream not to keep their agreement because Herod had lied to them. Herod was furious and ordered the slaughter of all Jewish boys 2 years old and younger to make sure he had snuffed out his competition. No, Herod was not the answer to "Where Would You Leave the Treasure?" Jesus has never been good news to someone like Herod who prefers power to truth.

Luke also tells the story of the priest Zechariah in this first chapter of his gospel. Perhaps a religious leader would be a better choice for where to leave God's treasure. After all, who could be more trustworthy than a priest, a pastor, a rabbi, or other religious leader? They stand for God's truth, and live holy lives of service; surely they would receive God's treasure with joyful faith, and even spread it to others so others can believe too. But no, we've also heard the story of Zechariah. The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah and told him he was finally going to have a son in his old age, a special son, who would prepare the way for the Messiah. It was an honor and privilege to be that son's father, to raise that son in the faith, and watch him begin to call people back to God. But Zechariah wanted proof in order to believe that such a thing, and Zechariah found himself cut off from being God's spokesman until after his son was born. And during Jesus' ministry, it was the religious leaders who found it hardest to let go of what they were sure they knew, let go of the power of their positions, and humbly believe that God had sent his Son in Jesus. No, the religious leaders were not the place to leave God's Treasure.

So where **did** God leave his treasure, that good news of great joy that God was sending his own Son to be God-with-us and that everything the prophets had said so long ago would come to pass? He left it inside simple people like you and me. What a risk God took! God left his treasure in the womb of a simple young woman named Mary, a woman of no wealth or power, an unknown, uneducated young woman engaged to be married to a simple carpenter. But both Mary and Joseph had the one qualification God looked for: Faith. Faith that made room for

something they did not totally understand, faith that believed God would take care of the details along the way. Faith that led to action. So off they went to Bethlehem to be registered and there in a barn, or stable, or cave, God's treasure was born and laid in a simple manger.

God also left his treasure with the shepherds out watching their flocks that night. Shepherds were simple men, fairly poor, uneducated, often uncouth men who cared for their boss' sheep. Trusted to lead those sheep to water and food during the day and to protect them from wild animals at night. And the angels came to those simple shepherds with good news of great joy that in the city of David had been born a Savior, the Messiah, and they would find that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes lying in a manger. The angels came to simple shepherds? Yet those simple shepherds had what God was looking for: faith that made room for what they did not totally understand, faith that believed God would take care of the details along the way. Active faith. And so off they went to Bethlehem to see for themselves and kneel before God's treasure. And they were filled with such joy that they told everyone they saw what God had done.

And, if that wasn't enough, God trusted his treasure to men of faith from places far away, men from outside the faith of the Jews, men who wanted to worship the newborn king. The magi were not mere simple people; they were well educated, wealthy men, powerful men of influence. The magi searched the night skies for signs of spiritual activity and the future- things that may be odd to us. But the magi had the quality God was looking for- faith that made room for something they did not fully understand, faith that believed God take care of the details along the way. Faith that would lead them to follow a star for 2 years to be able to kneel before the One born in a manger and give him gifts worthy of a king.

Where did God finally trust his treasure- the good news that Jesus was born to be God-with-us? In the hearts, minds, and bodies of people with faith, faith that made room for what they did not fully understand, faith that believed God would take care of the details along the way. Active faith that would share the story so others would also come to believe. And because they did, and others after them, and others after them, now 2000 years later we sit in this beautiful simple sacred space and believe in this same Jesus and have life in his name.

Friends, God has amazingly risked leaving us his most precious treasure- the good news that his Son Jesus, was born in Bethlehem to be God-with-us, here, not far off and distant, not a force of nature, or a star in the night, but here with us, in the faith-shaking twists in our lives, the celebrations of life, and in our last breath

as we pass into God's arms. Yes, God has risked trusting his treasure to simple us. The Apostle Paul says it like this in 2 Corinthians 4: 7 "We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us." Simple, everyday clay jars like us now hold God's treasure. Ordinary clay jars like us with a divine purpose- to live and speak by faith in the One born in the Bethlehem night like Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and wise men.

What will we do with God's treasure this Christmas season? I invite us to choose one or two simple ways to share God's treasure this Christmas, nothing flashy- remember we are clay jars, not beautiful fancy jars that decorate a home. If you go to a store, thank the person who serves you with a simple, "God be with you this Christmas." I know that Christians are arguing to say "Merry Christmas," but friends, it says so little. Merry Christmas says no more than "Have a holly, jolly Christmas!" But "God be with you this Christmas" wishes them God's treasure, God's good news.

And in our homes if we're hosting Christmas, or if you'll be in a family member's home, bring a simple white Christ candle with you and ask to light it on the dinner table or another place where it can shine in honor of the One born to be God-with-us. Or find another way in your own style. Whatever we do as clay jars holding God's treasure this Christmas, let's not keep it to ourselves. God be with all of us and those we are with, and all those who long to know God is with them, as we celebrate the birth of the One born in the Bethlehem night.