

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS: HOPE

John 1: 1-14

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, December 4, 2011

He had known what it was to be popular! For 30 years he had entertained Lords and Ladies with his operas. But those days seemed long past. Creditors were at his door. He was depressed. He could not sleep and he was plagued by rheumatism. If he did not come up with a musical success soon the 56 year old composer feared he would finish out his days in a London debtors prison. But, two letters arrived that fateful summer of 1741 that would change all that for George Frideric Handel. The first letter was an invitation from the Duke of Devonshire inviting him to the Irish Capital, Dublin, to produce a series of benefit concerts "For the relief of the prisoners in the several gaols (jails), and for the support of Mercer's Hospital in Stephen Street, and of the Charitable Infirmary on the Inn's Quay." Handel thought the change might do him good and besides, he was eager to be out from under the persistent dun of his creditors. He accepted the invitation.

Shortly thereafter a second letter arrived from a wealthy but somewhat eccentric English Land owner named Charles Jennens. He quickly opened the letter. Jennens had written some lyrics for him in the past. To his amazement the letter was a compilation of Old Testament and New Testament scripture passages. George read the words again and again. He was greatly moved and felt impressed to put them to music in oratorio form. An oratorio is a sort of spiritual opera. Handel locked himself in his study and within 7 days he had completed Part I -- the Christmas section or the oratorio. He presses on to Part II that focused on the Redemption and 9 days later that was finished. Then, in less than a week he completed Part III - The Resurrection and Future Reign of Christ portion.

He took his new oratorio to Dublin with him. The new oration first came to the public's attention on April 8th, 1742 at the public rehearsal. The first official presentation was on April 13th. It was a tremendous success. Handel lived for another 17 years and lead many performances of this great work. In fact, he conducted the last one only eight days before his death. Charles Burney, 18th century music historian, remarked that Handel's Messiah "fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and fostered the orphan."

When Handel regained hope he gave the world Messiah, the greatest Christmas music known to man. Within each of us is the ability to regain courage, to renew perspective, and to march on in the great challenges of life. The Hallelujah Chorus is an expression of all believers who have beheld his glory full of grace and truth. The apostle John gives us an exalted view of our blessed God who came to us in the Incarnated Christ. There are five truths from this passage that we shall consider.

HE CAME FROM ETERNITY INTO OUR TIME (Verse 1) "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

Sitting around a campfire on the banks of Currituck Sound one night at our annual children's camp for First Baptist Church, Norfolk, I said to the kids, "Jesus lived before he was born. He even lived before the world was created. He even created the world." Some of them had never heard that before. Their eyes got big and they said, "How do you know?" Then I read them the first three verses of John 1.

Matthew and Luke begin their birth narrative with Bethlehem. But John goes back beyond Bethlehem, back beyond the prophecies of the Old Testament, back beyond the creation account in Genesis 1, and steps out into eternity and says, "This is where Jesus came from." He came from eternity into time which we measure from his birth as year one A.D. In him the Eternal makes us who are temporal eternal also.

HE CAME AS GOD INTO OUR HUMANITY (Verse 14) "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

A careful study of the words that John uses reveals deep truths. He says that the Word was *theos* which means "God". In verse 14, he identifies the Word with man. He says that the Word became *sarx*, or flesh. The Greek word for body is *soma*, but he does not use that word. He instead uses *sarx*, which includes man's body,

mind, soul, and moral nature. This includes everything that is a human being. It means that God became one of us. Theos and sarx became one. The New Testament affirms the deity of Christ and presents him as the God-man.

Dr. George W. Truett, who grew up in these mountains and became pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas, said of this, “Christ is God-man. As much God as if he were not man at all, and as much man as if he were not God at all.” John introduces us to two of the foundational beliefs of the Christian faith: the deity of Christ, and the first statements of the Trinity.

HE CAME AS LIGHT IN OUR DARKNESS (Verse 9) “That was the true light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world.”

The contrast of light and darkness is one of John’s themes. There is an historical time that is referred to as the “dark ages.” It refers to the period of European history from about 500 to 1000 A.D. This was a time when governments had no control over the people; urban areas were decimated because of continuous wars. Man degenerated into more of his lower nature. Most every nation has had their dark time. Most every life has had its dark phase. One of the darkest times in American history was our civil war and one of the issues was slavery. These slaves tried hard to keep hope alive and found it as God came into their darkness.

There is a mythical story about the slavery time in South Carolina. Pastor Otis Moss tells it like this: “There is a story that I am told has been passed from mouth to ear somewhere along the palmetto dunes of South Carolina, a story passed down from West Africa to the North Atlantic. It is the story, a unique story, of the people who could fly. Depending upon whom you’re talking to, it is a little bit different, depending upon who is telling the tale.

The story takes place in St. Johns Island, just off the coast of South Carolina, as Africans who had been mislabeled slaves are toiling in the hot sun. They are working so very hard to pick cotton. There is one young woman and beside her is her small boy, maybe six or seven. She’s working in the fields and she has such incredible dexterity that she is able to pick cotton with her right hand and caress the forehead of her child with the left. But eventually, exhausted by working so hard in the fields, she falls down from the weight and the pressure of being—in the words of Dubois—“problem and property.” Her boy attempts to wake her very quickly, knowing that if the slave drivers were to see her the punishment would be swift and hard.

He tries to shake his mother, and as he’s trying to shake her, an old man comes over to him. An old man that the Africans called Preacher and Prophet, but the slave drivers called Old Devil. He looks up at the old man and says, “Is it time? Is it time?”

The old man smiles and looks at the boy and says, “Yes!” And he bends down and whispers into the ear of the woman who was now upon the ground and says these words: “Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

At that moment the woman gets up with such incredible dignity. She stands as a queen and looks down at her son, grasps his hand and begins to look toward heaven. All of a sudden they begin to fly. The slave drivers rush over to this area where she has stopped work and they see this act of human flight and are completely confused. They do not know what to do! And during their confusion, the old man rushes around to all the other Africans and begins to tell them, “Cooleebah! Cooleebah!”

When they hear the word, they all begin to fly. Can you imagine? The dispossessed flying? Can you imagine the disempowered flying? Three fifths of a person flying? The diseased flying? The dislocated flying? They are all taking flight! And at that moment the slave drivers grab the old man and say, “Bring them back!”

They beat him, and with blood coming down his cheek, he just smiles at them. They say to him, “Please bring them back!”

And he says, “I can’t.”

They say, “Why not?”

He said, “Because the word is already in them and since the word is already in them, it cannot be taken from them.”

The old man had a word from West Africa, cooleebah, a word that means God. It had been placed into the heart of these displaced Africans and now they had dignity and they were flying.

Ah, is it not the job of the church and the preacher? No, we are not called to make people shout. No, we are not called to make people dance. No, we are not called to have our bank accounts fly. No, we are called to make sure that the people of God fly! Fly from breakdown to break through. Fly from hurt to healing. Fly from heartache to being mended to a whole person. We are called as a people to ensure that those who have been marginalized have a word in their spirit that allows them to fly. And the question is: are we a part of a church, are we a part of a ministry that causes people to fly?

Isaiah says it: "They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength. They mount up with wings as eagles. They shall run and not get weary. They shall walk and not faint."

Yes, when the word of God is in us, we can fly." That is hope!

HE CAME TO SHOW US OUR WORTH (Verse 12) "But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name."

The abyss that is between God and man is closed because the sin that separated us is forgiven and he has made us his spiritual sons and daughters.

No longer would we have to ask ourselves, "Who am I?" "Am I significant to God?" "Am I worth anything to others?" But life today tends to dehumanize people and see them as numbers or as a "nobody". We revere the sports and entertainment stars. We see the beautiful people and we do not look like that. We learn of the rich and famous and their lifestyles and we struggle on. So we are faced with the gnawing question of our worth.

But in Christ, all of that changes. He makes everyone beautiful as a person of significance to him. He turns nobodies into somebodies. As a believer, you are a son or daughter of God with all of the rights and privileges of the Divine family.

If you are not a believer, you can have your sin forgiven, you can have your life changed, you can live with hope, and you can be given eternal life. You see, Jesus took the initiative in coming for you. He knew that you could not get to him on your own. The word "believe" does not just mean to give intellectual assent. It means to acknowledge your need, confess your sin, turn to Christ, and commit your life to him as your Lord and Savior. It is not easy, but it is blessed and once you are in Christ you will wonder what kept you away so long.

And that is hope! Praise be to his Name!