

SERMON TITLE- "Don't You Wish It Was True?"

TEXT- Luke 1:57-80

PREACHED AT- Neighbourhood Church

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As I was thinking about the Christmas season I happened to stick a CD into my truck CD player. It was CD made up by an old rock and roller from the 60s named John Fogerty. The first song struck me as a profoundly Advent song. So today I want to revive an idea that I used before- instead of "The Gospel According To Country Music" this sermon could be called, "Advent According To Rock And Roll."

Movie clip from "Don't You Wish It Was True?"

I dreamed I walked in heaven just the other night

There was so much beauty, so much light

Don't you wish it was true

Don't you wish it was true

An angel took my hand, said you don't have to hurry

You got all the time in the world, don't worry

Don't you wish it was true

Lord, Don't you wish it was true

But if tomorrow everybody was your friend

Anyone could take you in

No matter what or where you've been

But if tomorrow everybody had enough

The world wasn't quite so rough

Lord don't you wish it was true

He said the worlds gonna change and it's starting today

There'll be no more armies, no more hate

Don't you wish it was true

Don't you wish it was true

And all the little children who live happily

There'll be singing and laughter, sweet harmony

Don't you wish it was true

Lord, Don't you wish it was true

But if tomorrow

Everybody under the sun was happy just living as one

No borders or battles to be won

But if tomorrow

Everybody was your friend

Happiness would never end

Lord, don't you wish it was true Alright!

So, you might well ask, what does THAT have to do with Advent? Let me explain.

We are continuing through our Advent sermon series using the material from our seminary. There is a great deal in the Christmas story that even 4 weeks of preaching can't cover- but in fact the overriding background theme for the whole Advent story is

captured in that song.

It is the story of a world filled with pain.

But it is not just about a world filled with pain- it is also about a gnawing conviction that this isn't how it should be.

This conviction is probably best captured in the universal awe at the birth of a child. For me this moment was summed up when Sebastian was born. We were all there, including Sebastian's birth father. I still remember the look on his face when he held Sebastian in his arms for the first time. He was overwhelmed.

I have seen that many times and it is most surprising when it comes from people who normally don't show awe at things. I have talked with the fathers whose lives are a complete contrast to things wholesome- but when they are near their new born children they are ready to promise their very souls to their care.

And so it is that the Advent season is a season of births.

The best known birth of the Advent season, of course, is that of Jesus but it is not the only one. There was another famous birth that makes up the story. It is as follows, the birth of Jesus' 2nd cousin, John the Baptist.

The Birth Of John The Baptist

When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy. On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, but his mother spoke up and said, "No! He is to be called John." Luke 1:57-60

They said to her, "There is no one among your relatives who has that name." Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, "His name is John." Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. Luke 1:61-65

The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, "What then is this child going to be?" For the Lord's hand was with him. Luke 1:57-66

And what was it that fueled the anticipation around John's birth?

First, the gathering around Elizabeth and Zechariah was not a peculiar one. This birth has been special. It was a birth to parents far past their normal age of having children.

Second, it had been preceded by the strange events that had occurred to Zechariah, in which he had been visited by an angel while serving in the temple and been struck with speechlessness.

And so when the naming of the child took place- the family and friends were gathered for this momentous occasion.

But overshadowing John's birth was something else- something that was highlighted by all the strange goings on.

It was-

#1. Rock And Roll Advent- The Great Wish

It was the wish and the hope that with this new child something new would take

place in the world of pain that they knew so well. In the Jewish tradition this wish went back to the very beginning of time- to the time when Adam and Eve took the first steps down the road to calamity. It came in God's words to the snake-

And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel." Genesis 3:15

With that every child that was born came with the hope that this might be the one to crush the head of evil.

Untold millions of children had already been born by this time and evil still ran its course- so every child did not have to carry the full weight of this hope any more. After all, the very first child born to Adam and Eve proved to be a murderer.

But it was only natural that when portents seemed to surround a birth- people naturally looked on that birth with new anticipation. The question on everyone's mind was "**What then is this child going to be?**"

John's birth had all the marks of something special. Everyone was in eager expectation.

As the father, newly restored to his ability to speak, Zechariah bursts into a song of celebration.

His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: "Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago) Luke 1:67-70

Zechariah was naturally overwhelmed but his song was not just any father's song- it was a song inspired by the Holy Spirit and it spoke a truth that goes far beyond that hopes and dreams of parents since the time of Adam and Eve.

It was a song that reflected the great wish of all humanity.

But this is where there is a different course that the Biblical Advent season takes- over against the Rock and Roll Advent- and frankly over against a whole lot of versions of Advent.

#2. The Gospel Advent- It Is Not Just A Wish

The fact is that, living in a tough world, people need something to keep them from sinking into despair. Everyone needs hope. In fact we crave hope.

There is an obvious problem with this craving. It means that we can easily begin to hope for things that aren't real.

Secular Christmas is a classic of the craving for hope. Coming at the darkest time of the year Christmas is a time when we all naturally feel the need for hope and light. So we tell each other stories that warm our hearts.

The story of Jesus birth was not particularly a story for this season of the year- but it fits so well with the theme of a heartwarming story that it fits naturally. I have heard it said that when the church started making up Christian holidays the idea of Christmas being put at the darkest time of the year made a lot of sense- and so Christmas was put at the winter solstice.

But it is, of course, not the only heart warming Christmas story. We all know the other one. It is the story of Santa Clause getting onto his sleigh and traveling around the world delivering presents to all the deserving girls and boys.

Every year several new versions of the Santa story are paraded out all focused on hope for people in need reassurance of hope.

One of the famous comes from an old editorial. It begins as follows-
Eight-year-old Virginia O'Hanlon wrote a letter to the editor of New York's Sun, and the quick response was printed as an unsigned editorial Sept. 21, 1897. The work of veteran newsmen Francis Pharcellus Church has since become history's most reprinted newspaper editorial, appearing in part or whole in dozens of languages in books, movies, and other editorials, and on posters and stamps.

"DEAR EDITOR: I am 8 years old.

"Some of my little friends say there is no Santa Claus.

"Papa says, 'If you see it in THE SUN it's so.'

"Please tell me the truth; is there a Santa Claus?"

"VIRGINIA O'HANLON.

"115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET."

VIRGINIA, your little friends are wrong. They have been affected by the skepticism of a skeptical age. They do not believe except they see. They think that nothing can be which is not comprehensible by their little minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be men's or children's, are little. In this great universe of ours man is a mere insect, an ant, in his intellect, as compared with the boundless world about him, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there is a Santa Claus. He exists as certainly as love and generosity and devotion exist, and you know that they abound and give to your life its highest beauty and joy. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were no Santa Claus. It would be as dreary as if there were no VIRGINIAS. There would be no childlike faith then, no poetry, no romance to make tolerable this existence. We should have no enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal light with which childhood fills the world would be extinguished . . .

“Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus” is the answer that we are so very happy with and this eloquent response has become legendary.

BUT there is a very big problem with it- it is not true at any level and worst of all, for the people who need it the most- for those children in truly desperate means- there is no Santa Claus delivering presents through the chimney. In fact it is the richest of children with parents able to go to the greatest lengths to shower their children with presents that they don't need- that the legend of Santa Claus has the most traction.

The story of Santa Claus is not the story of Christmas- and confusing it with Christmas is a big problem because the story of Christmas is nothing if it is not true.

The story of advent is about the dream becoming fulfilled. The birth of John the Baptist was the first of the actual signs that the promise that God had given Eve- that a Saviour was going to be coming as her offspring- was about to arrive.

Further down in the song, Zechariah says-

And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him . . . Luke 3:76

The Saviour was coming- that is the story of Advent. That is very Good News.

But what were they expecting would happen when the Saviour arrived? The state of

affairs was clearly a mess. Where does one begin?

Just as there is a universal wish for a better world there is also a universal inclination for what this Saviour will do-

He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David . . . salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us Luke 1:70-71

And this is why, when I listened to the John Fogerty album I was so astonished at what I heard after the “Don’t You Wish It Were True?” song. The very next song was-

Gunslinger

**Lookin' out across this town
Kinda makes me wonder how
All the things that make us great
Got left so hard behind
This used to be a peaceful place
Decent folks hard workin' ways
Now they hide behind locked doors
Afraid to speak their minds
I think we need a gunslinger
Somebody tough to tame this town
I think we need a gunslinger
There'll be justice all around
Someone let the fences go
Wild eyed bunch moved in you know
Shootin' up the streets shoutin' everybody down
Dogs all runnin' loose
Wrecked the papers, closed the school
Tired old judge got roughed up too
No one left to make a stand
They whisper, "What's the use?"
I think we need a gunslinger
Somebody tough to tame this town
I think we need a gunslinger
There'll be justice all around**

The universal answer to the question of what we expect is-

#3. The Rock And Roll Advent- We Need A Gunslinger

That appeal to the Gunslinger is there in Zechariah’s Song. The Saviour will come and bring us-

. . . salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us . . . to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear Luke 3:71-74

Zechariah and the people of his day knew exactly what they were looking for in the Messiah. He was to be a “gunslinger.” They knew exactly what was wrong with the world they were living in. They were a people oppressed by an evil empire.

The Roman armies ruled the land with a iron fist. This iron fist crushed criminals as well as any religious people who dared to stand up to Caesar.

That was Zechariah’s vision and to some degree it is a necessary one. Someone strong has to come in to fix the mess.

He looked down on his son and knew, by the Holy Spirit that his son was going to be the messenger going before the coming Messiah. His son would prepare the people for the arrival of the “gunslinger.”

But even as Zechariah sang his song and even as he imagined that the “gunslinger” was on his way- the Holy Spirit was placing words into his mouth that spoke of something else.

... to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace. Luke 1:77-79

But even as he sang the song, inspired by the Holy Spirit Zechariah spoke of a surprise that would unfold in the years ahead- a surprise that should not have been a surprise-

#4. The Gospel Advent- The “Gunslinger” Doesn’t Carry A Gun

In fact as he looked down on his helpless young son- Zechariah was looking down on what God’s “Gunslinger” would look like.

God Himself- as the awesome God of Justice would come to earth as a helpless child. Of course, every “gunslinger” was once a helpless child.

But it turns out that in this case the helpless child is actually a symbol for something far deeper and that is the helplessness of this child would also be the mark of the Kingdom of God.

Jesus was not going to ride into town and wipe out the evil in the world in the way that everyone expected Him to.

Instead of pointing at all the evil in the world Jesus would turn His gaze to each and everyone of us and direct us into the “path of peace.”

The problem- He would teach, 30 years later, is not out there- it is down inside of each of us. We are the problem and the way of peace rests with each of us- if we accept His message.

It turns out that the Advent story has 2 parts- each with a deep challenge to the normal way of thinking-

1. The Universal Longing For Hope

But this hope has to be real- and the declaration of the Advent season is that it is profoundly real- not in the sense that the hope that Santa is real- but in the sense that real people- first John the Baptist and next Jesus Himself would enter history and bring salvation.

2. We Need A Gunslinger

True- but God’s rescue package is not a rescue that

And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel. Luke 1:80