

St. Andrew's UMC  
December 28<sup>th</sup>, 2008  
Luke 2:22-40  
"The Child Grew and Became Strong..."

As the year draws to an end, thoughtful people reflect upon things that happened this year. There are many things that happened. Some of them were welcome, while others were wished not to have happened. Some things happened because they were intended to happen that way. Other things happened, as if they were out of control. It is not unusual for thoughtful people to ask questions why things happened the way they did.

Religion is a way of looking at things. Religion tries to provide an explanation of the phenomenon: something in question happened, because such and such took place. For example, one may want to ask, if life takes place in a totally random, accidental way, or according to a specific plan. People feel better, if they believe that things in life are structured, not randomized. People become confident in their belief, as things take place according to a plan, or their prayers. What was your personal experience this year: did

things happen randomly, or according to your prayers?

When a disaster strikes, however, human beings are known to hurl the accusatory questions to God: "Why me, O God?" Or, "Where is God, in times such as this?" So, did it happen randomly, or intentionally? Some place the blame squarely at God's doorstep. Others point the finger at oneself or other fellow human beings.

A Buddhist might explain this way: it happened, because of what you have done in the past life: it's the karma. To a Buddhist, everything has the causal relationship, and everything is the consequence of something that happened in the past. And at the same time, it is the cause of something that is to happen in the future.

A person who repudiates any involvement of deity in the human affairs might attribute it to a random, statistical incident, as in the case of a lightning strike. The rest of things happen by design, if not by the natural

matter of course. They might ask, why should you believe that you are exempted from what every one else is exposed to?

Or, other religiously oriented people might subscribe to the view that things happened, because we offended or pleased God, and it was the punishment, or reward, from God. You have heard what certain people said, when AIDS broke out. I am curious what they said to the illnesses such as asthma, cancer, diabetes, coronary disease, and obesity. They seem to have answers to every question.

**I**f religion tries to provide a way of looking at things, religion also tries to shape the world. Religion may require what is to be done, and the followers may feel called upon to enforce their beliefs and values upon others. Explaining why things happened the way they did is not enough for some, and they want to make sure that the world is ordered in the way they see fit.

In order to shape the world in the way they see fit, some take up arms, while others do it at the polls and through the airwaves. Whatever the method they utilize, they are all into one thing: others must adapt to their way of thinking, liking, and living. There have been always the socio-political and economic consequences to these attempts.

**T**here are plenty others who are also interested in shaping the world. They do not believe, however, in the enforcement of their beliefs or views upon others. To them, religion is a way of telling a story, and then leaving the rest up to the followers to behave according to the teachings in the voluntary way. They are interested in becoming the example of behaviors to others. In Christian teachings, the metaphor used for that purpose is: becoming the salt and the light of the world.

Those who subscribe to this latter method of living the exemplary life focus more on transforming themselves than making others

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conform to their ways. They allow room for disagreement, and even room for opting out. For sure, they want to shape the world in a way, yes. But they want to do it by living their exemplary lives. They rely on others' ability to see and judge for themselves, in order to bring transformation to the world.

**I** know. Some would say it will never work. I must admit that it is not a very effective way of getting things done. It is actually a very slow and uncertain way of getting things done. Those who have less patience tend to go the way of enforcing one's way on others, but there is the lasting problem: it will beget grudges among those who are forced. Things might conform to one's desired ways for now, but there is no telling what might be waiting to hatch way down the road.

And Jesus questioned: why do you see the speck in your brother's eye, but not see the beam in your own eye?

Though slow and uncertain of its projected goal, if the religious people were able to show the good examples by first removing the beam from their own eyes, and others decided to follow the suit voluntarily, there would not be any repercussions way down the road—precisely because it was done *voluntarily*. And that is the Jesus' way of doing things. Problems seem to sprout, when things are forced upon people, whether it was well intended or poorly intended.

From these findings, then, we can surmise, based on what beliefs the story of the birth of Jesus was told.

**F**irst, the birth of Jesus was not an accident or a random act of reproduction: it was designed by God for the specific purpose of benefitting the human kind.

Secondly, it was not karma, or the repayment of the past deeds, or the consequence of the past action. It was rather God's grace that overlooks every individual offense worthy of everlasting

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karma, the grace that takes initiative to reach out to us, before we know it: John Wesley called it the *prevenient* grace—the grace that comes before we ask for it, or even feel the need for it.

Thirdly, it was an act of setting an example for the followers of the religion how to go about becoming a disciple: by showing the example through which the disciples would *voluntarily* copy the exemplary life and lesson of Jesus. The operative word here is “voluntarily” of course.

Nevertheless, there would be consequence to the birth of this child, Simeon said:

"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed--and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

**F**alling and rising of many, being opposed by many, and a sword piercing Mary's own soul—these do not sound like a

story with a happy ending. It sounds more like a dark prospect ahead. I see the bad moon rising. I see trouble on the way. Is this supposed to be the sort of future for the child upon whom is God's favor? Luke did say:

"The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him."

Wait, if the favor of God was upon Jesus, why did his future prophesied to sound so ominous? If God's favor was upon someone, isn't the person supposed to experience success and happiness? Is it God's favor to have the person rejected, cursed, beaten, and killed? Who would call it a favor, and who would want it?

**M**aybe that is the reason why religion does not seem to bring an effective improvement to the world. People do expect that they will receive the favor of God before the others. They expect that their way of life will prevail over others' ways of life. They expect that their

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imagination of God to be the only true one. How is it different from seeking preferential treatment and privileged status? Religious people are seeking God's help in achieving what other secular people are looking for. Then they insist they are always right. Is that the core value of the religion?

No wonder, so many become surprised and disappointed in God. No wonder, religion seems to promote more hatred and division in the world. The more devout they become, the more eager they are to rash out and punish those who oppose their doctrines and interests. Instead of becoming the example for others, the religious people are busy trying to make others conform to their standards.

**I**f it is true that the event of Jesus Christ was not a random act, but a prophesied and planned one, then one should expect that God's favor on Jesus had a specific purpose. So the question we need to make clear is:

Is God's favor in demand, because it will give us the head start ahead of the rest of the population, *or* because God needs to equip those whom God calls to fulfill God's plan?

The religious people should determine at the earliest opportunity, whether God's favor is designed to be their privilege and entitlement to be enjoyed, or to be used in service to God's greater plan.

**M**aybe there is a good reason why Jesus said this in Matthew 22:14:

"For many are called, but few are chosen."

Maybe, there are too many Christians who want God's favor to be their reward. Maybe, it is the religious culture of today that defines what it means to be faithful: being faithful means to be entitled to the worldly perks which God hands out to the special, privileged Christians over the rest of the humanity.

And when the entitlement checks fail to arrive, many lose their

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faith—rightfully so. They never had the faith anyway. Any faith that is predicated to the entitlement or privilege should be considered as the temporary insanity or delusion. These symptoms are very difficult to cure, unless its core problems are dealt with by the inner transformation.

God calls each one of us to fulfill God's plan. In that plan, there may be included the blessings that we seek. But there may be also the business that might pierce our own souls. Nevertheless, may God cultivate you, strengthen you, and fill you with wisdom in the New Year, and the favor of God be upon you, as you are equipped to fulfill God's plan for you.