

December 16, 2018 (Third Sunday of Advent)

TEXT: Luke 1:57–66

TITLE: The Other Christmas Story – Part II

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

Today we heard about the birth of John to his elderly parents Elizabeth and Zechariah—an event of wonder, a miracle actually, that caused those who witnessed the blessed event to say expectantly, “What then will this child become?” Advent is about expectancy—about living in the present and looking toward the future, trusting in the God who is active now for the sake of what is yet to come. That previous sentence was not just pious religious jargon. I want you to remember it because I’m going to return to it later. I’ll say it again: God is active, initiating wonderful things now for our salvation and for the sake of what is to come; therefore, we are a hopeful, Advent people—every one of us, every day.

New topic: The U.S. military has a serious problem on their hands. As might be expected, lots of soldiers work hard to keep in shape—jogging and exercising even when they are on overseas duty. The problem is that the fitness technology they use to track their activity uploads their locations onto the internet in ways that others can readily access. You could see the route soldiers and officers take as they jog near their bases in Iraq and Afghanistan. Even personnel on secret assignments can be tracked through satellite heat maps and location seeking apps present in their personal electronic devices. And not everyone tracking this information has their best interests at heart—so it’s a serious problem.

This issue isn’t just a military problem. A recent New York Times article described how scores of apps people have uploaded onto their smartphones not only track our movement, but then sell that information to advertisers. It’s a big business; by some estimates, it is worth as much as \$21 billion a year. Right now a snapshot of this sanctuary would likely show well over a hundred smartphones present inside our church this morning. In order to identify who owns the little dot that is the Smartphone in your pocket or purse, someone just needs to follow the dot to where it stops for the night. Or follow it to the gym, to work, to the liquor store or wherever you happen to be going. Software tracks your phone literally hundreds, perhaps thousands of times a day and then uses that information, for example, to make sure an ad for the Starbucks you pass each day pops up on your screen at just the right time.

Sure, that kind of personal marketing may be annoying, but is it harmful? Well, what if the person you’re tracking works at a nuclear power plant? What if the person is an aide to the governor or the president? What might be possible if you knew their precise movements—perhaps the places they go where they would be vulnerable or the things they do they’d like to keep secret? It’s a problem.

New topic: We recently learned about the birth of twins, Lulu and Nana, who benefited from very controversial gene-altering technology. The Chinese scientist, He Jiankui, received a lot of negative publicity for his unauthorized experimentation using CRISPR

gene editing technology, tampering with the chromosomes of pre-fertilized eggs. But it should be noted that he was not truly the first to try this technique out. As far back as the 1990s, invitro fertilization technology commonly involved swapping out some of the fluid inside human eggs with fluid from healthier egg donors, allowing for some of the donor's mitochondrial DNA to mix with the host mother's DNA prior to fertilization. The Food & Drug Administration later stopped this procedure, but in other countries like Great Britain it is regulated and still allowed. Now the twins Lulu and Nana will be studied as they grow older, but as scientists attempt other forms of genetic alterations in embryos, we too may end up echoing the words of those who welcomed the birth of John the Baptist and say to ourselves, "What then will this child become—and what does all this mean for future generations?"

I could go on and name other examples, but my point is this: Technology always outpaces morality. The capacity to invent new things always moves faster than our ability to think ethically about how best to use these new things. We can sometimes imagine what the results of a scientific discovery might be, but only after we've lived with it for a little while do we truly understand the impact it has on our lives. Fracking sounds great as a way to create jobs and lower our dependence on foreign oil until it destroys the groundwater reserves for an entire region or leads to increased earthquake tremors. Driverless cars could save lives and make public transportation much easier, but it could also eliminate millions of important jobs—taxi drivers, truck drivers—and hurt our economy in that way.

Innovators are quick to point out the benefits that will come from the latest new things—and yes, there have been lots of very positive advancements in science and technology over the years. But innovation always outpaces morality and it is wrong, perhaps dangerous, to simply tell ourselves that things are always progressing forward. It is in this discussion that our Presbyterian heritage comes in handy. Presbyterians take a skeptical view when it comes to human progress. We know that many things presented as bright lights of change have a dark side and dangerous shadows. Presbyterians have been known to argue theologically that human life is marked by the quality of total depravity. This doesn't mean that we are totally evil or that we are unable to do things which are good. It means that when it comes to sin, every aspect of our being has been affected. We do not possess the ability to earn our salvation—to do everything right so that, by our own merit, the doors of heaven will swing wide and the welcoming parade will usher us through the pearly gates.

OK—could this sermon get any more depressing? Fitbits reveal where soldiers are stationed overseas and put them at risk. Companies sell our location data for profit or even worse reasons. Genetic engineering is happening now in babies that will impact us for generations to come. And on top of it all, John Calvin reminds us that each one of us lives in states of total depravity. Nice Advent sermon, Randy!

Old Topic: What is the central feature of both the traditional Christmas story and the other Christmas story we heard today? Both tell of the birth of a child—miraculous births with signs and wonders pointing to God taking the initiative for us and for our salvation.

Elizabeth and Zechariah were a lovely, pious, fairly non-descript older couple, who did their duties faithfully when it was Zechariah's turn to burn incense in the temple, and whom some pitied because of their lack of children. Were they famous? Would they be on billboards featured along the Judean highway? No. But something happened when Zechariah went into the temple that day—when he was confronted by the angel Gabriel and emerged literally speechless. And when the child was born, given a name from heaven, everyone talked about Elizabeth and Zechariah's son—saying over and over again, "What has God done in our midst—What will this child become?"

Mary and Joseph were, as far as we can tell, a lovely, pious, non-descript couple, forced to travel from home due to onerous government regulations, who end up delivering a child in a stable. Did this happen in a booming capital city? Did it involve people of great influence and power? Heavens, no. Bethlehem was a village and Mary and Joseph were on no one's celebrity list—no one's radar, except God's. Once again this Christmas birth was an unexpected act in a fallen and sinful world unable to heal itself and get things right on its own. God took the initiative, because that is what God does.

None of us knows what impact we are having in the world. But that doesn't stop us from getting up each day and doing the best we can to live right, help others, loving God and loving our neighbor. Our Presbyterian forefathers warned us that we and all humanity are marked by total depravity—totally unable to earn our own salvation. But knowing that is oddly freeing, because it leads us to take a deep breath and trust in God all the more. If the only way we can get where we hope to go is by God's grace, then it makes sense to start trusting that grace more and more. It makes sense to expect we will be surprised in our lives through unexpected things—through morality that pushes back on technology's authority, through ethics that restrains unbridled political power, through noticing the people on the margins of our life (the bank teller, the person at the bus stop, the new employee in our office, the aide in the nursing home) and seeing them as equal recipients of God's intentional, incarnational, saving grace.

It's what I was talking about when I started this sermon. Advent is about expectancy—about living in the present and looking toward the future, trusting in the God who is active now for the sake of what is yet to come. In the birth of John, in Jesus' birth, in that young girl in Sierra Leone, in that young boy in Penn Hills, God is at work and our response is to wonder "What then will this child become?" Look around—God is at work now for the sake of what is to come. That's what makes us hopeful, Advent people—every one of us, every day. Thanks be to God!