

A Holy Season For What?

Today is the second Sunday of Advent, the four Sundays in preparation for the church's celebration of the birth of our Lord. People talk about the Christmas season as being a holy season, a holy time of the year. Of course it has become so commercialized we have to search for the sacred and the holy in it, but perhaps we can find it if we look hard enough. A Holy Season moving toward the celebration of a Holy Night. We even sing about that night as a Holy Night. A holy time of the year, but a holy season for what purpose? For what reason?

As you know I just returned Friday night from a week spent in Israel. The Holy Land, we call it. I want to tell you a little bit about the trip this morning, not just to wet your appetite for a trip to Israel, but I have a reason behind it all. Something I want us to consider as we prepare for Christmas.

I was thinking a bit about that word Holy as we traveled this past week. The Holy Land. It seems that nearly every place in Israel is regarded as a holy site to either Christians, Jews or Muslims. What makes a place holy? Webster defines holy as **“belonging to or coming from God; hallowed; consecrated or set apart to a sacred use; having a sacred character or associations; as, the holy temple; holy vessels; holy words.”** These places are considered holy because they were set apart, either by men or by God, as a place where God interacted with men. In fact, the first time in the bible where the word holy was used was referring to a place. In Exodus 3:5 God told Moses to take off his shoes because the ground he was standing upon was holy ground – this holy place where God met with man.

Monday we went to Bethlehem. It's an interesting journey now as you have to go behind the security wall that Israel has built to separate the Palestinians and the Israelis. With passport in hand, it's a little like going to see someone in the jail here at David L. Moss. We walked behind fences with razor wire atop them into a bunker like building made of concrete and steel. We passed through a check point with an unsmiling young Palestinian girl in uniform sitting behind a bullet proof glass. She looked us over and handed back the passport and we were allowed to pass through to the other side. We found our way out of the building and now, behind the fences and the razor wire we find a man waiting for us to take us to a second taxi driver who takes

us to another place to meet a guide who then takes us to view the Holy sites in Bethlehem.

The guide drove us first to what is called the 'milk grotto.' It is a cave really which apparently had held a crusader church and then a modern church facility was then built over it. The legend held that this was the place where Mary and Joseph stayed before leaving for Egypt and that Mary nursed Jesus there and a drop of her milk fell upon the stone and miraculously the stone in the cave turned white. People have been chipping away pieces of this white colored stone for centuries and legend has it if a woman grinds the stone and puts it in her drink her baby will be healthy and her milk nutritious or some such thing. It is a holy place....to some...

We went to the shepherd's field – another holy place. Of course there are three shepherd's fields, one overseen by the Catholic Church, one by the Orthodox church and one by the Evangelicals in town. The Franciscans had built a beautiful church on a site that had been used as a church back in the third or fourth century. This was considered a holy place because this was the area where the angels came and announced to the shepherds that a child was born, a Savior, Christ the Lord. It was the place of a holy light, a holy moment when the heavens opened and a multitude of angels declared "glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace and goodwill to men."

I tried to imagine the moment as the heavens filled with the sound of the angels' holy announcement – that redemption's plan had accelerated into full motion, that nothing would ever be the same as God came down to dwell among men. The mystery of the incarnation was announced in this holy place – God appearing in flesh, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

We went then to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Three churches actually control the site: the Roman Catholic, the Orthodox and either the Armenian or Syrian Orthodox I believe.

We walked along with scores of others into this ancient site. Behind the Orthodox altar and down some short steps we walked into this tiny room where a silver star in the marble of the floor indicates the spot where tradition says Jesus was born. A few feet away in another area is the spot where the manger supposedly stood that held the infant Jesus, God incarnate.

I watched as people packed into this tiny area, all snapping pictures, trying to get close. Some knelt, kissing the spot where Christ was born because they regard it as a holy place. Some prayed, some were reading the story of his birth from the Gospel of Luke, some merely stood in silence, meditating upon what happened as God came down to touch this holy place.

Tuesday we went to Shiloh, the place where the tabernacle stood for almost 400 years. This is the place where the ark of the covenant resided, where God's glory dwelt above the mercy seat. This is the place where Hannah came and prayed for a child to be born with a promise to give that child to God. This was the place where a few years later according to her promise, she brought the son that had been born to her, Samuel, and presented him to the Lord and to Eli the priest. This is the place where Samuel learned to hear the voice of God, where God spoke to Samuel and where God began to speak through Samuel as well. The bible says, **“The Lord continued to appear at Shiloh and there he revealed himself to Samuel through his word.” I Samuel 3:21.**

I walked out onto this plateaued area where archeologists believe it was likely that the tabernacle stood. I actually hesitated for a moment, wondering if I might be treading on the area where the ark of the Covenant once stood. Is this the place? Is this the place where the Lord continued to appear at Shiloh and I'm walking here? Lord deliver me! I'm walking on a hillside where perhaps Samuel ran and played as a boy, where Samuel first heard God's voice calling him, the place where Eli fell over dead when he heard the news of his sons' deaths and that the ark of the covenant had been captured by the Philistines. This was the place where God had met Samuel. Was this holy ground? Perhaps it was.

Wednesday we went to the place tradition says was the upper room where the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the believers. People were in all parts of the room, praying, singing, reading Scripture. Larry and I prayed together and then a guide took us to the wall. “Here. Touch this. Put your hand here. This is a first century stone. It would have been here when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the church. This is a holy place.” I looked at that stone and thought of the tongues of fire that sat above the heads of the 120 followers of Christ that had gathered in that room. I wondered if the

fire and the wind that rushed through the room might have scorched the stones. Were we in that holy place where God's Spirit was poured out on believers? Where God met with man. Was this holy ground?

We went that afternoon to Bethany, to the place where some think Lazarus had been buried and raised from the dead by the Lord's command. Where God met man and showed him he had power over death and the grave. Was this a holy place?

The list could go on and on. A holy land. A holy place. A holy season. But holy for what? Holy for what purpose? Even if all of those places were or are holy places, they are holy for what reason?

As I thought about these places, it occurred to me that they are perhaps holy signs to us, holy reminders of what happened in those places, that God really did meet with men and women, interacting with them to forever alter their life and destiny. Holy for a reason. The tragedy is that while we easily declare places holy, hallowing a site because of what happened there, we forget the really important stuff. We forget the substance, the lives changed, and instead we hallow the signs, the events that occurred. We make the places holy but we ignore the holy God who was encountered there. We are quick to declare places holy and to treat them as holy, but slow to treat as holy the people whom God met there and the people whom he still desires to meet in those places and a billion other places, places where by his presence and his intentions, those places too become holy. I think that's what God really desires. I don't know that he needs any more holy sites in Israel, but I'm sure that he needs some more people who will recognize what is truly holy in their lives and in the lives of those around them. If we do that, I think we might be on to something that is truly holy.

Allow me quickly in the remaining moments to just mention some holy things that we might often miss – things we really need to recognize and regard as holy in our lives.

1. We need to regard our body, mind and spirit as holy. We need to recognize that we were created by God and set apart for his glory, his honor, his purpose. Remember Webster's definition of holy? "Belonging to or coming from God....set apart to a sacred use." I think that describes us as believers and followers of Christ. Paul wrote, "**Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit,**

who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.” 1 Corinthians 6:19-20

This body we have is the temple of the Holy Spirit. It belongs to God by creation and by redemption, consequently, this body is to be respected and cared for as God's possession. This temple is holy.

We should be careful of what we put in this temple – the physical body. The foods you eat, the quantity of food we consume, drugs, tobacco, alcohol, so many things that are harmful to this physical body. It is holy and we should treat it as holy, the temple of the Holy Spirit.

The context of this passage in 1 Corinthians 6 is dealing with sexual immorality. The bible warns us about sex outside of marriage and the consequences associated with this sin. He says we are sinning against God and against ourselves because our body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and we are to be careful how we use this physical body. It's more than biology. We are a spirit with a soul living in a body. We are God's creation and this body must be treated with respect and according to God's commands and standards.

We should take care of what we put into our mind and spirit as well. Violent tv, movies, video games. Inappropriate music that demean and degrade women and that promote sin and sinful life styles. Paul said to guard your heart and mind and to think about things that are true, noble, pure and holy (Philippians 4:8-9). If we are going to treat something or some place as holy, let's include our body, mind and spirit as a holy place and let's be careful how we treat it. And because this body is the temple of the Holy Spirit and so is the body of the folks sitting next to you, we are to treat their body as holy as well. Their body is not something to be used, taken advantage of, degraded or demeaned. Our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit and must be honored and regarded as such.

2. We need to regard the relationships in our life as holy. Our relationships should be set apart unto the Lord so that all of the interactions of our life bring honor and glory to God. Think about the relationships in your life. Would you consider them holy? Pleasing to God? Serving God's purposes?

You that are married, think about your marriage relationship. We refer to marriage in the church as “holy matrimony” or “the holy estate of marriage.” It is holy because God is in this covenant of marriage, uniting two hearts, the two becoming one flesh. In Ephesians 5:25-33 Paul tells us that this holy relationship of marriage is a mystery, a sign showing the world how Christ loves the church and gave himself for her. This holy relationship also is to show the world how the church loves and respects and submits to Christ as well.

Marriage is to be a holy relationship according to God’s purpose and his order. We make a big deal about holy places, but let me ask you married folks: **Have you made your marriage relationship a holy place?** Do you honor your spouse and love and sacrifice and respect and show appreciation for him or her? Do you recognize and regard your spouse as a gift from God to be revered and loved and honored? (Gary Smalley story of the Stradivarius violin. When he told the crowd there was an audible response. Smalley said, “That is the sound of honor.” Do you honor your spouse?)

It’s not just for married folks. Ephesians 6:1-3 says children are to obey their parents. “Honor your father and mother” the bible says. Ephesians 6:4 says that fathers (and mothers) should not exasperate or frustrate your children. Parents honor your children and children honor your parents.

Honor and hallow all the members of your family. Be thankful and grateful for them. And not just relatives but what about the other relationships in your life? How do we treat each other? Are you honoring the relationships in your life. Do you treat your friends with honor and respect? Here is what the bible says: **“Anyone who does not do what is right is not a child of God; nor is anyone who does not love his brother.” I John 3:10. “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: whoever loves God must also love his brother.” I John 4:20-21.**

You can respect and hallow all kinds of places and things, but if you don’t love one another you’ve missed the point. You’ve lost the way. What good is it to regard all the cities and places as holy but hate your brother and you don’t consider the relationships in your life as holy and as coming from God. Whoever loves God must

also love his brother.

As we entered the ancient city of Bethany, where Mary and Martha and Lazarus lived, where Lazarus was raised from the dead, with holy sites inside, I noticed the sign before the check point said, "If you have an Israeli passport, do not enter this city." We revere the site, but we don't revere each other. What's more important, the place where God did something or the people around us that God loves so much that he sent his Son to die on Calvary to redeem them from their sin? Which is holier, the place or the people?

As we were leaving the country the day after Thanksgiving we heard about the Wal-Mart employee who was trampled to death by shoppers trying to get their Christmas bargains at Wal-mart. What irony that something so unholy happens as part of the Christmas season, a holy season. We wouldn't ever be a part of anything so cruel, yet we trample over the hearts and lives and feelings of others at times. God help us to treat each other with holy reverence and respect and honor. Finally, on this second Sunday of advent, I want to suggest that...

3. We need to regard this season as holy. Here's what I mean by that. In one sense we should regard every day as holy. Every day is another holy opportunity to receive the day from God and to use the opportunities presented to us to accomplish his work and his will. But especially at this season, I think we should accept the opportunity to prepare our hearts to celebrate the miracle of Christmas, the incarnation, the coming of Christ our redeemer into the world. We should chose to regard this as a holy season and refuse to allow the busyness or the commercialism of the secular holiday to trample on the holiness of Christ's birth. Let's carve out a place and a time to meditate upon the greatest of all mystery stories: God in a manger. A Savior born in a stable. A precious lamb come to give himself as a sacrifice to atone for the sins of the world. We can't afford to become so busy that we miss the miracle of Christmas.

I began this message talking about those holy places in Israel where God met with man, saying that was what made them holy – the place where God met and interacted with man. What a strange place to call holy - a manger in a stable. But that was the place where God became man and dwelt among us. It's worthy of carving out the time to consider such a holy place. Such a holy thing, a holy event.

And what an even stranger place to call holy, a bloody Roman cross on an Israeli

hillside. But that is where the precious Lamb of God took upon himself my sins and your sins so we could be cleansed and made holy and set free. That's why he came, born of a virgin as a holy and sinless sacrifice. A holy sacrifice upon a strange and holy place.

Let's make the decision to regard this season as holy and then prepare our hearts to celebrate his birth. What do you do when you know a baby is coming? You prepare. You prepare a special room, a special place set aside to welcome the baby. I suggest we do some preparation then, to set aside a special place in our hearts to welcome again the coming of this Holy baby, this holy one that meets us in a manger, becoming like us in flesh so we could become like him thru his redemption. He the perfect sacrifice for our sins. Let's prepare our hearts so we won't miss the miracle of his birth. Let's prepare our hearts to give him room, to honor him, to meditate upon, rejoice in, and celebrate the birth of the truly Holy One – our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

There are lots of holy things and holy places in this world. Let's make sure we regard as holy those people, places and things that really count. Let's regard as holy all that is holy this year.