

"The Story of Jesus' Life"

Date: March 11, 2007

Text: Philippians 2: 1-12

How would you feel if I announced that instead of a regular sermon there was going to be a test on the life of Christ? Not just where he was born but many other questions about what he did and what it means to us. I suspect some would be fairly comfortable while others might be a little apprehensive. Still a few might be thinking, "Boy, that is one test I am sure to flunk."

Isn't it amazing given the importance we attribute to this man from Galilee how little the average Christian knows about his life and how difficult it is to explain why his life, death and resurrection are the most important occurrences in human existence? So much has been said about this man from Nazareth but still there remains this haunting question: WHO REALLY IS THIS JESUS? Some of you already may know quite a bit about our Lord's life but this morning I want to offer a brief overview of this individual who has been called the greatest man who ever lived. Our third hymn, "Lord of the Dance," provides some helpful hints.

The first verse of "The Lord of the Dance" suggests that the Almighty One who has created the world has come to dwell among us. This someone who comes to "dance on earth" we know as Jesus. Christmas is so much a matter of glitter these days that it is easy to forget that originally the story conveyed a much simpler message. It's all about what God does in the midst of very ordinary circumstances: a stable, a few shepherds, and humble parents in an out of the way place. Jesus grew up in the small town of Nazareth. At age 30 he realized that God was calling him to a special ministry. God's call for him to try to restore the relationship between people and their Maker led Jesus to be baptized in the Jordan River by John the Baptist. Then he started preaching in the region of Galilee. It's a relatively simple story that takes place among people like ourselves and we forget that to our own peril!

The 2nd and 3rd stanzas of the song remind us that Jesus came to teach and heal and to announce the coming Kingdom. That's why Jesus initially was known as a teacher, a "rabbi." His teaching was addressed to common folks beginning with his first followers who were humble fishermen and his stories were tales that emerged from life experiences. For instance, the road from Jericho to Jerusalem was known to be treacherous because of robbers. Thus when Jesus told about a man traveling that road and being beaten, the parable of the Good Samaritan, his listeners readily could identify with what had taken place.

The majority of Jesus' teaching has been collected in Matthew, chapters 5 - 7, what is called the Sermon on the Mount. What he said was not just comfortable clichés. Jesus challenged people to change, to put God first, to love one another even those we don't like. The song gives us a hint of the reaction to Jesus' words: "I danced for the scribe and the Pharisee but they would not dance and they would not follow me." People who were in power, who felt self-satisfied, didn't want to hear what Jesus was saying.

Many people today zero in on Christ's teaching but the New Testament actually devotes most of its attention to the last week of his life. The 4th verse proclaims, "I danced on a Friday when the sky turned black." Jesus' ministry moves from challenge to confrontation. By the time he sets his sights toward Jerusalem it is clear to him that giving his life may be the only way to jump start people back to where God wants them to be. It often is asked, "Why would people want to put him to death if Jesus was such a great person?" It's the same old story: Jesus began to push people, to question the power structure; people say they want improvement but few are willing to pay the cost. It seems much easier to get rid of the person who is making everyone uncomfortable.

Think of all that plagues our world: selfishness, arrogance, and deceit. Jesus took upon himself the baggage of humanity and because he did we are able to "dance more lightly" into the new day. Let me share one of my favorite stories, which is about a 4-year old boy who was in worship with his parents. The boy looked and saw a cross hanging there but didn't know what it was. He kept pestering his mother to tell him. She finally said to him. "Tommy, I'll tell you when the service is over." He replied, "That's okay. I figured out what it is. It's the letter 'I' crossed out." Recall the response of this little boy during Holy Week as Jesus takes upon

himself all the evil, personal and corporate, of human existence. That 4 year old was right on the mark: the selfishness of humanity is pushed aside, the "Me, me, me" quality, to make room once again for our Creator.

Easter, the final act in the drama, is all about God's ultimate victory over the forces of evil. "Lord of the Dance" declares, "They cut me down me and I leap up high. I am the life that will never, never die. I'll live in you if you live in me. I am the Lord of the dance." A small band of people, numbering fewer than worshipping here this morning, sensed so intensely the words of the song - Christ living in them - that their lives were changed forever. The same promise can be made today: live in Christ, make him a part of your daily life and he will live in you.

Bethlehem, Nazareth, Jerusalem, Calvary and empty tomb: It's when we appreciate the full sweep of Jesus' life that the impact dawns upon us. Amazing things can happen when we open our lives to this Galilean. Marj Carpenter, former moderator of the Presbyterian Church, tells this true story. There was a radio station in Barrow, Alaska whose broadcasts reached Siberia. The station ended each night with the song "Jesus loves me." When the Iron Curtain came down, people who went to Siberia found the natives singing, "Jesus loves me." The first thing the natives said to the visitors in great earnestness was, "Now tell us who this Jesus is."

We who have grown up with the Book and with the story of Jesus sometimes forget what the people from Siberia had come to appreciate intuitively deep in the marrow of their lives. One writer perfectly summed up our Lord's purpose upon earth when he wrote about "One Solitary Life."

He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village where he worked in a carpenter's shop until he was thirty. Then for three years he was an itinerant preacher. He never wrote a book. He never held an office. He never had a family or owned a house. He did not go to college. He never visited a big city. He never traveled more than two hundred miles from the place where he was born.

He did none of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself. He was only thirty-three when the tide of public opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One of them denied him. He was turned over to his enemies and went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a stake between two thieves. While he was dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, the only property he had on earth.

When he was dead, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend. Twenty centuries have come and gone and today he is the central figure of the human race and the leader of mankind's progress.

All the armies that have ever marched, all the fleets that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of people on this earth as much as that One Solitary Life. Dr. J. Francis