

WHY ARE WE HERE?

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

Christmas Eve 1976

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John 13:3-5

Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded.

Is that part of the Christmas story?

That depends on how you look at it. Christmas, of course, has to do with a birth. We are here to celebrate the birth of Jesus. This is a kind of birthday party. At least, that was my assumption in coming here. I don't know what yours may have been.

But it is rather hard to say much about a birth. During my first year or so in the ministry I complained in a sermon that deaths received much more attention both in the church and the community than births did. I said that the newspapers ought to run an article on people when they are born at least as big as the one they run when people die. But that wasn't very reasonable, for there is not much to say about people when they are born. They haven't done very much and their circle of acquaintance is rather limited. So all we usually get is something like this:

Matter of Record

December 25, Joseph and Mary Helison, boy. The births of famous people rarely are celebrated until after their deaths. And what we celebrate is not primarily the birth itself, or the death either. It is what happened in between.

What did happen in between? Well, we talk about that many Sundays here at church. John the Evangelist wrote that if he tried to tell it all, the world could not contain the books that would be required. But he tries to sum it all up in a phrase or two regarding a scene toward the end of Jesus' life, that scene in the upper room.

Jesus, knowing... that he had come from God and was going to God... girded himself with a towel.

That's an interesting sequence, isn't it? "From God... towel... to God." It is an intriguing way to sum up the whole story, of saying who Jesus was and why he was here. And more than that, why we are here. For in the same incident, while he is washing his disciples' feet, Jesus tells them that this is why they are here too. "For I have given you an example," he says, "that you should do as I have done to you."

"From God... towel... to God." Is that the same sequence as birth -- life -- death? Not quite. For then we would be saying that God was in on the birth (angels, star and all that) and that God was in the death (rending the temple curtain, and so forth) but that God had no part of the life. But that would not be right at all. For the thing that is always evident about

Jesus is that his life is rooted in eternity, not just at the beginning and at the end, but at every point in between. That is what always comes through to people; not simply that he is a nice fellow who washes people's feet at the end of the day, but that in every little action like that, he is expressing his relationship to something deeper and is drawing other people into relationship with that deeper reality.

"From God...towel...to God." You see, the items in that sequence are interconnected all along the way. What they mean is that all along the way Jesus knew why he was here. It wasn't that he was ignorant of the loose-endedness of life. He left a lot of loose ends himself, getting executed at the age of thirty-three or so. One of his own followers, the man who wrote the letter of James, asks us:

"What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little time and then vanishes."

Jesus knew that. Yet even so, he believed that the mist had meaning. That it rose from the deep waters of God's love and that to those waters it would return.

And so because he knew that, "He girded himself with a towel."

I never noticed this remarkable passage until one day I came across a printed sermon by a teacher of mine. Paul Scherer was a Park Avenue preacher who later on taught preaching for many years at Union Theological Seminary. He was the last man I saw as I got into my car and set off to work among the aborigines in the wilderness west of the Hudson. As a student I never was much impressed by Scherer as a preacher. But years later I came across an ancient volume of sermons by him that contained one called "Why Are We Here?" It was based on this passage where Jesus girds himself with a towel. The sermon struck me where I lived. I took it home and copied out the whole thing.

Of course, like all good sermons, it is something of a period piece. It reflects both the futility and the silliness of a post-war period, post-war being post-World War I. Scherer quotes Bertrand Russell and Clarence Darrow on the meaninglessness of life. He cites an article about a man who wheeled a sixty pound stone across the country in a red, white and blue cart in honor of Franklin Roosevelt's first election. He speaks of another article telling people how to eat pumpkin pie with all five senses. I had thought we didn't learn how to do things like that until the 1960's. In short, the preacher describes what he calls "modern society" as a society in which the sense of purpose is missing. He calls it "a bridge without piers."

Then he quotes that odd text again. "Jesus knowing that he had come from God and was going to God...took a towel and girded himself, and began to wash his disciples feet." "What," asks Dr. Scherer, "if that were the meaning of all this mysterious world of human life? What if God were the going, with only space enough between for some towel-girded ministry to feet that are weary and journey-worn? You will have to decide for yourself what your solution is going to be. I can only commend this to you as the most radiant of them all. You may not believe it; but at least you must have the grace to uncover your head before the beauty of it!"



I think so. That much grace, anyway. As much grace as the shepherds who kneeled beside the manger. Enough grace, at least, to honor such exalted humility. But if we find even more grace, enough to believe it, we may share in Paul Scherer's conclusion that this is indeed "the answer" as they used to say back in the thirties. It is an answer in which, in Dr. Scherer's words, "Love can afford to be lowly because it is great" and "eternity itself" is "nothing but an adventure with God in love, which is the only thing that can make even eternity worth while!"

The Gospel of John does not contain what we ordinarily call "The Christmas Story." It does not recount the when, the where or the manner of Jesus' birth. John provides no matter of record on that score. But toward the end of his story John does report that on the evening before he died, "Jesus, knowing that he had come from God and was going to God...girded himself with a towel..."

And that is why we are here.