Sunday, December 21, 1986
A CHRISTMAS PERSPECTIVE
Matthew 1:18-25

Our human lives have a way of getting out of balance. We find ourselves placing too much emphasis on what are not the most important things and too little emphasis on the most important. Sometimes it takes a crisis or a longed-for gift to come into our lives or even maybe a sermon in church to help us get a fresh perspective into our living.

Not long ago, a woman that I know came down with a very serious illness. It was diagnosed as cancer with a 50-50 chance of coming through it to good health. She told me that this fact helped her gain a new perspective on life. She began to re-examine what was most important to her and to her family and what was least important. Some of the things that she had stressed so much up to this point now fell away as being insignificant.

Again, not too long ago, I was visiting with a couple who had always wanted a child but were discouraged because it was doubtful if that gift would ever come into their lives. Then, not long after, the woman discovered she was pregnant. Not quite nine months later, a healthy baby became an integral part of their lives — and they said after having the baby a few months, the baby gave them a new perspective on what life in this world is all about.

At this time of year, I believe that hearing the Christmas story one more time can also give us a new perspective, and that's our theme for the morning — a Christmas perspective. A perspective is an idea of the relative importance of things.

If any of you have ever been to Bethlehem where Jesus was born, and you wish to go into the Church of the Nativity, as it is called — a church that is constructed on the site where the manger originally was — you will remember that to get into this church building, you have to enter through a rather small opening. In fact, unless you are a child or a midget, you have to bend over to enter. It is said that the entrance to the Church of the Nativity was constructed that way on purpose so that one has to stoop over in a position of humility to see the place where Jesus was born.

Samuel Goldwyn once said that he wanted to make a movie that would begin with an earthquake and work up to a climax. Most of us can understand that kind of thinking because it fits in so well with the way we see the world and what's important. We are impressed with size, with what costs a lot, with prestige, and with power. Whatever is big and flashy gets our attention, and we easily conclude that if it is big enough and noisy enough, it must be important. It's so easy to get our perspective out of whack!

Now look at the Christmas story. Nothing about the Bethlehem event as it is told in the New Testament seems to fit into our idea of important and impressive events. As we think about it, there's almost nothing in the story that fits in with our ideas.

The birth of Jesus occurred in a small town, in an out-of-the-way place. Surely, if we had been in charge, the birth of the Messiah, if it was to be of any significance, should have taken place either in Jerusalem, the religious center, or better still in Rome, the political capital. That's where the action is — in politics.

And where did Jesus grow up? In another small town — Nazareth. Nothing important had ever come out of Nazareth. It had never produced a famous individual, or a prophet, or a person who was recognized as being filled with God's spirit. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament at all, which means that it hadn't any notable religious or historical associations.

Not much of a location for the Messiah of God to come from!

I'm told that in real estate, in our time, there are three important factors and they are: location, location, location. That might be true in real estate, but it has nothing to do with the way God works in our lives or in the world. God is not impressed by location!

And yet sometimes even in our Christian faith, we are overly impressed by location. As some of you know, for the past year I've been a member of a national committee of our denomination appointed to study the issue: Should we continue to keep our national church headquarters in New York City, or should we move the headquarters to another city somewhere else in the country? It's been a fascinating process. I've had a chance to visit and study a number of major cities in the country as a result.

In each city our committee visited, we were told by those who were trying to get us to move there — this city is a center of power and influence in today's world — your church headquarters should be here. The leaders in New York City stressed that point most strongly, and I'm sure that some of our national church leaders feel the same way — that the headquarters should be where they can bump elbows with the important and powerful leaders in this country and in the world so that the church can make its influence felt for the good.

It's a tempting notion. And then I remember that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, not Jerusalem or Rome, and that he grew up in Nazareth — and according to the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, never went to Jerusalem, except as a baby, and when he was twelve years old, and then was there the last week of his life and was crucified there. During his years of ministry, he spent most of his time with what we today would call the common people, and the time was spent in small towns and in the countryside. Maybe we need to remember such things to help put perspective in our own lives. The power of the church is wherever people are gathered in Christ's name.

As far as we know, that first Christmas, only Mary and Joseph were present when Jesus was born — maybe a local midwife was called, we don't know. Maybe some animals were in the stable — the Bible doesn't mention any. Those who first learned about the birth were not the movers and the shakers of that day — some shepherds came to the manger later that night.

The powerful of the world, the leaders in politics and statecraft, the UPI, and the Associated Press were not notified and didn't cover the story. Not even the Jerusalem Times was represented. Nobody took much notice of what had happened in Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph were not well-known people, and after all, what possible difference could a baby in a manger make in the world anyway?

The Gospel of Matthew tells us that a new star appeared in the sky — but the only ones who noticed were some foreigners who later came to see the baby.

The story of Christmas, in its simplicity, can give us a new perspective. God's ways are not our ways. God forever surprises us. God is not impressed by the mighty and powerful in this world. God does not come to us in the garb of a conqueror. In an incredible act of humility, God

enters our world in the same way that each of us entered this world — in the apparent helplessness of a child. As the Christmas carol, “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” reminds us — "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given! So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.”

Another way of stating the Christmas perspective is this: Christmas turns everything upside down.

Halford Luccock tells a story of accidentally bumping into a woman who was Christmas shopping and loaded down with packages. The bump caused all the packages to scatter around her. As he was trying to help her pick up the packages, she said, “Oh, I hate Christmas anyhow! It turns everything upside down.” Luccock said to her, “That is just what Christmas was made for.”

Christmas is about a baby, and that is a baby’s chief business, turning things upside down. As those of us who have had children know, a baby rearranges everything he or she sees, from the order of who’s important in the family to the dishes on the table. A baby in a family divides time into two eras, just as Christmas does. There is B.C., which means “Before Child,” and A.D., which means “After Deluge.”

The central truth of the gospel, of the coming of Christ being born in Bethlehem, is that it turns everything upside down. The upside of heaven comes down to earth.

The Christmas story puts a new value on every person. It reminds each one of us that we too are children of God. Human beings are not things to be used. We are not chemical accidents. Everyone is a VIP because you have divine worth. There is not one human being in the world more important than any other in God’s eyes.

The Christmas perspective is good news in a world of bad news. It is light shining into darkness. As the Gospel of John puts it: “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.” The further truth is that the darkness will never overcome the light of the world.

The Christmas perspective puts down the mighty things in a person’s mind, such as location or place, rights, power, and exalts the things of low degree — humility, simplicity, and trust. The story of Christmas rearranges everything.

Jesus said, “The first shall be last and the last first.”

Jesus also said, “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” We say, “Blessed are the bold and the tough, for they shall inherit the earth.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” We say, “Blessed are the rich in spirit, or those who are rich in any way, for that’s the way to get ahead in this world.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” We say, “Blessed are those who never cry, for crying shows weakness, and who needs comfort anyway!”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” We say, “Blessed are those who forget about righteousness, it’s better to make deals, for after all, the end justifies the means.”

The story of Christmas tells us that God and God’s world operate in a different fashion than we often believe. Christmas turns things upside down and inside out. It gives us a new perspective on the world and the way God works among us.

The Christmas story gives us a new perspective on ourselves and our basic nature. In coming to know Jesus who was born in Bethlehem, we also come to know that there is another and quite extraordinary part of us which is never altogether at home with the everyday necessities of living in this world — paying bills, going to work, watching television, and other things with which we try to fill our lives.

Because of Christmas, we know that there is more to life — that our lives are also filled with eternal longings and hungers. We can sense the divine within us and within others. We know that we are connected in countless ways with each other and with all of creation. We know too that life goes on in a new way after this life and that our life here and now is only a tiny bit of eternity.

We are like the wild duck in Kierkegaard’s parable — the wild duck that dropped into a farmyard for a meal of corn and stayed on for the next, then the next, until he became a tame duck. But each autumn, when his fellow ducks passed overhead in their migratory flight and called to him, there was a restlessness deep inside of him and he remembered who he was and what he was made for. He stirred and stretched his wings, but he never left the ground.

Celebrating the coming of Christ at Christmas is something like that. It helps us remember who we are and that there is far more in us than meets the eye and that our dignity as human beings begins and ends with God. Indeed, the whole creation is holy because God is among us and within us. That’s the Christmas perspective. Amen.