Sunday, December 8, 1996
THE MINISTRY OF JESUS
Isaiah 40:1-11; Mark 1:1-8

In this season of Advent, when we remember Jesus coming into the world, something special stirs within us, and we continue to celebrate his coming jubilantly. But if someone asked you, "What difference did the birth of Jesus make to the world?" what would be your answer? It's not as easy a question to answer as it sounds. If you were asked what difference Thomas Edison made to the world, you would not hesitate for a minute. You would say, "Why, Thomas Edison made all the difference between light and darkness."

Isn't it true that sometimes, when we are in a particular mood, when it seems as if nothing good is taking place, we wonder if the coming of Jesus made any difference at all? His birth hardly caused a ripple on the surface of his own world. The Roman Empire went right on its imperialistic way, just as it had done before Jesus came, for almost 400 years after Jesus died.

There is still a lot of violence in the world. Is there any less superstition in the world now than there was before Jesus came? Have governments been any less corrupt since Jesus was born than before he came? Are people any better able to handle the problems of life than we would be if he had not come?

Sometimes I am as shocked as you are to see how unable we, who have been trained in the Christian tradition and have almost two thousand years of it behind us, often are to handle some of the simplest situations. A woman once called a minister friend of mine, and her problem, which she explained at great length, was very simple: she had married a man slightly older than herself. He had always lived with his mother, and his mother continues to live with them. They were planning a Christmas party. Her question was: was it necessary to include in their party, and her husband's party, the friends of his mother? If they did, she felt the party would be a failure. That was her great Christmas problem. Behind it lies a basic inability to deal with the simplest problems of human relationships. It makes you wonder whether the coming of Jesus has made any difference in the lives of people or not.

So, during this Advent season, in this sermon series, we are looking at the uniqueness of Jesus from different perspectives and how he has made a difference in the world and in the lives of individuals. We are discovering how he is the same as all of us and how he is different.

Last Sunday, I noted that Jesus was a "holy" man, an individual who lived on that mysterious boundary where the human and the divine intersect. He knew firsthand the experience of the holy. He was vividly in touch with what we call the "world of the spirit," that dimension or reality beyond and within the visible world of our ordinary experience — a dimension charged with power, whose ultimate quality is compassion. He lived the human-divine intersection. He was the human-divine intersection.

However, Jesus was not a holy man for his own sake or for the sake of holiness, but for our sake — for the sake of everyone in the world and for the world itself. As the Gospel of John puts it: "God so loved the world that God gave the only Son." Jesus calls us to be holy, that is, to let God's spirit be active in our lives — not for our own sake, so that we can brag or show off to others how holy and righteous we are — but for service to others.

To understand this better, we are going to look in some detail, in this sermon, at the ministry of Jesus and how he treated people, so that we can understand what that implies for us as individuals and as a church congregation. True holiness always leads to compassion for and service to others. In the long run, that's what is going to make the most difference in our world for the better.

It is commonly believed that Jesus began his public ministry when he was about 30 years old. He had been baptized by John the Baptist, and for a time, both of them carried on a public ministry, each with his own distinct following.

Then something happened without warning. King Herod Antipas arrested John the Baptist and put him in prison. John was taken into custody because he had publicly denounced the king for entering into an immoral marriage with Herodias, the wife of his own half-brother. Not long after John's arrest, he was put to death by Herod.

The arrest and subsequent death of John the Baptist deeply shocked and saddened Jesus. It served as a warning to him that he, too, was in danger.

In addition, the arrest and death of John the Baptist caused more attention to be focused on Jesus. This obscure carpenter from the town of Nazareth abruptly became an object of widespread attention among the people. This attention was of two kinds: one of high hope and the other of suspicion.

The high hope was found in his disciples and among the common people in Galilee, many of whom had earlier placed their hope in John the Baptist. Maybe, just maybe, here was the leader who would, with their help, drive the Romans from their occupied territory. There is evidence for this in the words used by one of the disciples in expressing his grief upon learning that Jesus had been killed: "But we had hoped he was the one to liberate Israel."

Jesus aroused suspicion among others, especially the religious leaders and high officials. They saw in Jesus a threat — a man who could be their undoing. They perceived Jesus to be a self-appointed reformer of many of their religious traditions and an agitator who could eventually arouse the masses.

Jesus was painfully aware of both misconceptions. Neither side understood his true purpose, which was to bear witness to the love of God.

Yet how could he convince people of God's unconditional love?

The stars on which he gazed in the wilderness of Judea were cold as ice. The Dead Sea, in which no living creature stirred, and the mountains behind the sea revealed no more than a God prone to anger, who punishes and sits in judgment. This extremely severe father-image of God prevailed.

Merely talking about the love of God and the God of love is easy. There was a lot of misery in those days, and people were locked into categories — some were thought of as deserving and favored by God, while others were considered outside of God's realm. A kind of religious caste system was in operation. Furthermore, when life is cruel and hard, it is easier to think about a God of wrath and retribution than to believe in a God of love.

So, the overriding theme that runs through Jesus' ministry was his concern for how he might demonstrate the existence of the God of love and make it possible for people to know and experience firsthand the love of God — and then be able to spread that love to others.

"Come to me, all you who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Reading these words from the Gospel of Matthew, we can picture Jesus with his arms extended wide, standing by the shore of the Sea of Galilee.

Above all, Jesus put into practice the love of God in his ministry. Around the Sea of Galilee, the towns were full of sick and crippled people who were neglected by their neighbors and even by their own families.

There were others — men and women like tax collectors and prostitutes — who were condemned by everyone. And there were the Samaritans, who were considered to be outside the circle of God's care.

Reading the gospels provides a picture of Jesus with his loving tendency for drawing close to men and women who were otherwise forsaken or held in contempt.

In the villages around the lake were victims of malaria, people despised by others because they were thought to be possessed by evil spirits, yet Jesus tended to their needs.

The lepers, forbidden to approach any village or town, were considered under the law to be unclean and to be the recipients of punishment from God. Yet Jesus ignored that part of the law and tried to help them. He enlisted into his group of close disciples one of the tax collectors, who were always objects of derision.

The gospels contain many stories about Jesus and these abandoned souls. The stories are of two kinds: one is where Jesus heals their infirmities, and the other is where, rather than performing a healing, Jesus simply identifies with them in their pitiable suffering — in other words, consolation stories.

What is especially impressive in the consolation stories is the way they picture Jesus spending his time on the sorrows of men and women to whom others paid no attention. Love and sympathy flowed from him to these forgotten people like blood from a deep wound.

At the same time that Jesus healed people and consoled them, he understood that many people are on the lookout for something else — they wanted practical and tangible results, signs and wonders, success that is visible. Yet love is an act which, in this visible world, does not always display a direct correlation with tangible benefits. Sometimes we can love and love and love, and see no direct immediate results. You've had that experience.

It's significant that in the gospel accounts, not one of the people that Jesus healed is said to have become one of his close followers. On the other hand, there is evidence that many of those he consoled, that he identified with, did become followers — even disciples. Miracles seldom bring commitment.

Thus, the pain of Jesus hides in the background of every miracle story written in the New Testament. He healed people out of compassion, yet he knew that it might lead to the wrong conclusion about him and his primary mission. He was afraid that soon people would look to him only for signs and wonders and would not hear the message of God's love.

Even his closest disciples frequently missed the point of his ministry. He overheard them arguing as to which one of them was the greatest. And Jesus had to remind them time after time that, “If anyone would be first, he or she must be the last of all and servant of all.”

As an illustration, one day he took a child and put the child in the midst of them. Taking the child in his arms, he said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but God who sent me.”

To us, that statement does not seem very revolutionary. However, Biblical scholars claim that there are no more counter-cultural, radical, revolutionary sayings of Jesus than those regarding children. As helpless, dependent, non-productive burdens, children were, in that time, at best, second-class citizens.

One day these children might grow up to be productive and protective of their parents. But until then, they stood far down the social ladder — even behind women, the poor, the sick, and the lame. With God’s spirit active in him, Jesus carried on his ministry. He used the helpless little child to symbolize, to stand for all the helpless, dependent people in our society.

What does all this have to do with us?

The ministry of Jesus is the pattern, the model for the ministry of us as individuals and for the church. The New Testament repeatedly calls the church the “body of Christ.” If it is the “body of Christ,” then it is called to do what Jesus did — to reach out to the outcasts, the broken-hearted, the lonely, the forgotten, and the sick. The church does not exist for its own sake, in the same way that Jesus did not come into the world for his own sake. The church exists to reach out to others and to tell them, in word and deed, of God’s love.

It’s so easy to forget this and get off track. We talk about having Jesus as our “personal Savior” as if that were the end of it all. In fact, the word “personal” does not exist anywhere in the Bible. It is not used even once.

Jesus did not come to lead us to a close relationship with him, but to a close relationship with God, and because of that, a renewed relationship with each other. As I noted last week, Jesus is the door, the opening, the way to God. And by becoming aware of our relationship with God, our experience of the holy, we have the power, the motivation, and the love to serve others.

How, then, do we receive Christ, this love of God, into our lives? Jesus said, “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me, but God who sent me.”

So here we are, at the second Sunday in Advent, having been taught for most of our lives that God is omnipotent, omniscient, powerful, and almighty — and God is all of that. But God is also something else too.

Now, this baby in Bethlehem comes, showing that God Almighty is a little one who loves little ones. And this little one grows up and becomes the servant of all and asks us to do the same. It strikes us as strange. It turns our world upside down. It is making a difference in the world, but it’s hard to measure.

We cannot say that there would be no real knowledge of the love of God in the world if Jesus had never lived. But we can say that in Jesus, the truth of the goodness of God and the love of God somehow focused itself, concentrated, and intensified so as to make them plainer, clearer, and more available than in any other place, person, or time in human history. And that makes a big difference. Amen.