

“A New Reality”

December 23, 2018

First Christian Church

Scripture Text: Luke 2:1-20

For one and a half thousand years the presence of God was defined by an item – the Ark of the Covenant. About a year after God freed His people from slavery in Egypt, Moses followed God’s instructions and had a large wooden chest built, then covered it with gold, filled it with the tablets on which God wrote the 10 commandments, a jar of manna, and Aaron’s walking stick that turned into a snake before Pharaoh; and called it the Ark of the Covenant. That Ark became the official meeting place for God and humanity.

They build a special tent or tabernacle for the Ark, and whenever Moses would enter the tent, the cloud of God’s presence would descend and consume the tent as God revealed His plans and instructions to Moses. The Ark basically served as a chair or footstool for God on earth. It was the priests carrying the Ark who first entered the flooding waters of the Jordan River which caused the river to stop flowing until all the people had passed through the Jordan to the other side on dry land. Not only did the Ark go before the people as they traveled, but it went before them in battle so God could win the victory before the soldiers arrived. For example, they marched the Ark around the walled city of Jericho for 7 days then 7 times on the last day, and the walls came tumbling down. 1 Samuel 4&5 tell the story of God’s people not being faithful to God, but taking the Ark into battle with them anyways. The Philistines won the battle and took the Ark home with them as a spoil of war, but it did nothing but cause them problems. They put it in their temple, but by the next morning, Dagon, the idol they worshiped, was bowed, face down, before the Ark. They set their stone idol back up, but the next morning it was bowed again and broken. When they moved the Ark to another town, the people there developed tumors and boils and the mice descended like a plague. The Philistines sent the Ark back to Israel along with extra gifts of gold, thankful to be rid of its power. Samuel was a young boy tending the Ark when he heard God call him to be the great prophet and judge of Israel. With great respect and fear King David and his son Solomon brought the Ark to Jerusalem and placed it in the temple as its first permanent dwelling place. From that point on, everyone knew that the temple was the place to go to be with God. If you wanted to bring an offering to God, you went to the temple. If you wanted to lift a prayer to God, you went to the temple or at least prayed toward the temple. The dream of every Jew was to be at the temple in Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover. If you wanted to learn about God, if you wanted to be close to God, if you wanted to connect with God in any way; you went to the temple. It was the official place God came to reside when on earth, because that is the place that housed the Ark of the Covenant. Just a few months before Jesus was born, Zechariah was in the temple, tending to the Ark, when an angel of the Lord came to him and told him that even though he and Elizabeth were old, they would have a son and they were to name him John for he would be the one to prepare the way for Jesus. For 1,500 years, the thin spot between heaven and earth, the place God chose to interact with humanity, was wherever the Ark of the covenant was.

That all changed one silent night in Bethlehem. God didn't come in a cloud of smoke to meet at the Ark. God didn't keep the Ark dry crossing a river or cause turmoil for its captors. God didn't call out from the Ark or send an angel to where the Ark resided. At Bethlehem, in the form of a little baby boy, God came to earth. We didn't go to the temple. We didn't search and find the Ark. No, God came to us, then God went out and shared the news. The angels didn't go to the official thin spot between heaven and earth. They went out into the fields and sang to shepherds while they were at work. This changed everything. No longer do we have to go to a specific place and bring a specific thing and pray in a specific way to get God's attention. God now comes to us when we are lonely and afraid, when we gather together in excitement, when we claim victory and when we are handed defeat, when we are angry and hurt, when we are content and comfortable, when we cry with grief and when joy fills our eyes. God can be a part of that because God is no longer constrained to a place.

The thin spot between heaven and earth is not defined by a place or a thing, but a person – by Jesus the Christ. He is God with us. As the song says, He came to “walk with me and talk with me along the narrow way.” It is an incredible gift, but a gift we sometimes we misunderstand. We think Jesus came to walk with us on our journey to help us go where we want to go and do what we want to do, but Jesus did not come to walk with us and help us. He came so we could walk with Him that He could lead us home. God doesn't follow us. We are to follow God. Jesus doesn't walk with us. We are to walk with Jesus. Yet we misinterpret it – we think if we can just pray the right prayer or jump through the right hoops, then Jesus will see things our way and work for us. We get really agitated and angry when it doesn't work that way. Whether out loud or on the inside we say, “God help me do this, and if you can't or won't help me, then the heck with you. Who needs you anyway.” But God is not supposed to follow our lead. We are to follow God's. God takes the lead by sending Jesus who simply says “follow me”. Jesus came to lead us home, not empower us to wander wherever our heart wants to go. We get to walk with Jesus because we are following Him, not Him following us. We need to remember what the Philistines learned a long time ago: the presence of the all-powerful God does not bow to our idols that we invent and hold up as the most important thing. No, those idols must bow to the very presence of God and the very presence of God is Jesus in our world, in our lives, in our hearts. And knowing who to follow makes all the difference in this world, and even more so in the next. Thanks be to God for coming to earth that we might never be alone and that we might follow Him all the way home to heaven.

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