

SERMON AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH

CHRISTMAS DAY DECEMBER 25, 2023

GALATIANS 4: 4-7 MATTHEW 2: 1-12

“CHOICES”

Hundreds of years ago, the Dutch painter Pieter Brueghel painted a painting entitled “Census At Bethlehem”. It showed people lining up at a government office to enroll in the census going on at the first Christmas. But the clothes of the people, the buildings, the landscape---it was all Dutch style. And it showed a busy village day---people were visiting, merchants were bringing things to town to sell, someone was butchering a pig, children were ice-skating on the pond, etc. A very busy town! And down in the corner of the painting was a little scene with no special focus given to it. There was a man leading a donkey into the town and on the donkey sat a pregnant young woman. No one in town seemed to notice, but it was Joseph and Mary---and within St. Mary was baby Jesus about to be born. The biggest thing that has ever happened was happening---the Messiah coming to the world, just slipping into town unnoticed.

This “biggest thing ever” that we celebrate today was the result of a series of 3 big choices:

Choice #1----God’s choice very, very long ago to create the universe and to create we humans in His own image.

Choice #2---Our choice as a human race. Would we walk with God our Father? Would we love and obey Him? Or reject Him? Sadly, we chose to reject Him.

Choice #3---Back to another choice for God to make.....Give up on us rebellious sinners? Or instead, come down to our world to save us and forgive us? God chose to come down!

Thanks be to God for the choice He made---not to destroy us, or abandon us because we rejected Him. But instead to come down to our world to save us! To join us! So 2000 years ago, God the Son, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, came to us as a baby at the first Christmas. He became one of us to save us. That is what Christmas is all about----God’s big choice! To join us, to become one of us in Jesus Christ. God is no longer far away. He came to us at Christmas in Jesus Christ.

And that choice by God to come down to us in Christ leads to another choice. This is a huge choice we each have to make in life.....what will I do about this fact that God came down at Christmas? It’s the biggest choice we have to make in life. And it’s a choice you face that only you can make for yourself. Your parents can’t make it for you. Your friends can’t make it for you. Your priest can’t make it for you. When it comes to this choice, you are all on your own!

You have 3 basic options with this choice-making----

Option #1-- Don't believe the Christmas story. It is a very radical story and lots of people don't believe it----that God came to our world as a baby boy. You won't be the first to not buy it! If you choose to not believe, it will be a sad choice--- but you are free to make it.

Option #2 Don't disbelieve the Christmas story-----just basically ignore it. Thinking along these lines, acting along these lines---"Oh, I guess it's true, but....I'm not going to do anything about it. I'm going to basically just ignore it." This is a very common choice and a very sad choice.

Writer G. L. Chappel wrote a story about after the first Christmas called "The Angels Were Gone." It is made up of little vignettes about possible things later in life for some of the people in the Christmas story. One is about one of the shepherds on the hill near Bethlehem who saw the angels when Jesus was born. It's years later and that shepherd is now an elderly grandfather. His little grandson, while visiting his home, says, "Grandpa, I know you were there when the angels came. Please tell me about it! Especially, tell me---what was that baby like!" The grandfather sadly answered, "Well, I can't tell you what the baby was like, because I never saw him. I saw the angels and everyone else said they were heading into town to see the baby the angels talked about. But it was late at night, and I was so tired..... So I told the other men to go on down without me.....and I stayed on the hill and had a good sleep! Never did see Jesus..." ("Our Daily Bread", 12/22/91)

So sad! But many, many people are like that shepherd. They are not unbelievers who deny the Christmas story. They just don't care a whole lot or pay much attention to Jesus Christ.

Option #3—Believe the Christmas story---and make the baby the center of your whole life. Focus everything you are and all you do on the story, on Jesus Christ whom the story is all about. Christ chose to come down to help you and save you. Option #3 is choosing to respond to His coming by dedicating your life entirely to Him.

Once there was a very talented young violinist. His violin teacher realized the student was passing him up and wanted the young fellow's talent to not be held down. So he lined him up with a great maestro violin teacher who could help the young man himself to become a famous artist. The maestro was a very demanding teacher---he saw the talent in the young fellow and required 100% commitment by his student so his talent could become fully developed. The young man progressed rapidly and before long was a very high-level violinist. The maestro decided it was time for his first public concert.

So he rented a concert hall, picked a date, and did extensive publicity about the new prodigy violinist. The publicity worked and on the night of the debut there was a large crowd. The only man on the bill was the young fellow. He would play three numbers. The crowd was made very happy by the first piece. It seemed flawless in every way and they loudly applauded. They noticed

something odd, though. The violinist did not take a bow and seemed oblivious to their applause. He only looked, in an anxious way, at his maestro who did not respond. Then he played his second piece---and it was better than the first. The crowd gave forth tumultuous applause---but again the young man paid no attention. He only looked at his maestro who made no response—and it was obvious the young man was frustrated. Then he soon began his third piece---and this one was even better than the first two. His playing seemed absolutely perfect and deeply moving---the crowd now applauded even louder and longer than before.

The people watched as the violinist turned again to look anxiously in the direction of his maestro. To his joy, the maestro smiled broadly and enthusiastically applauded. And now the young man bowed deeply to the audience. You see, he was playing only for his maestro. He didn't really care if the audience approved---only if his maestro did. And he could not be satisfied until the maestro clapped! (Ian McPherson, The Art of Illustrating Sermons, Baker, pp. 67-68)

If we choose Option #3---to believe the Christmas story and live only for the baby in the story---then we are like the young violinist playing only for his maestro. We should live only for our master, our Lord Jesus. We should do all we can to please Him, to show Him our love for Him.

Christmas is a good time for big choices. You have 3 to pick from--#1: Don't believe the story. #2: Believe it, but ignore it. Or #3:---Believe the story and live totally for the Son of God.

At the first Christmas, God made a big choice-----and the baby came. Now we have to make our choices. Let us choose to live totally for the Lord as a way to thank Him for coming down to us.