

One Life to Live

*Consequently, when Christ came into the world, he said,
“Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
But a body you have prepared for me . . .”
We have been sanctified through the offering
of the body of Christ, once for all.
(Hebrews 10:5, 10)*

A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, **December 23, 2018**

(Volume 02 Number 23)

Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

My Advent series this year has borrowed for its titles some of television history's best recognized daytime dramas, affectionately known as *Soap Operas*.

Isaiah's prophecy of a coming Messiah began, "*The people who sat in darkness have seen a great light.*" Imagine arriving three weeks ago on that First Sunday of Advent to a dark sanctuary, pitch black darkness until a single candle on the wreath is lit. With that light as a slim hope, we emerge from the *Dark Shadows* with a sense that we have come to *The Edge of Night*, the edge of whatever darkness might have been surrounding us. With one light we began our Advent journey with a slender Candle of Hope.

Yet, where shall we go from here? Going back into the dark wilderness surrounding us is no option. So we huddle, for a full week, around that single Candle of Hope. Then on the Second Sunday of Advent another candle is lit, and the second candle illuminates a path, a way. We can now set out on our journey. This second light is John the Baptist, "*the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare ye the Way of the Lord.*" With that second candle we begin our journey around the wreath, *As the Wreath Turns*, or *As the World Turns*.

Last Sunday a third candle was lit and the wreath truly began to curl, to wrap around us with a hug, to enclose us in its light and its warmth, gathering us together as a family. We remembered the story of a miraculously pregnant Mary meeting her cousin Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist who was six months along in her own miraculous pregnancy. Mary praised God in the Magnificat saying, "*Surely the Lord has done great things for me and holy is his name. From now on all generations will call me blessed.*" Gathering the generations around the globe, we felt ourselves a family of God's beloved, hearing God himself call us . . . *All My Children*.

Tomorrow night is our Advent destination for the wreath and its five candles, and also for this series seeking to illuminate the lessons of those candles. On Christmas Eve the shepherds in the fields surrounding Bethlehem will see the glory of Lord shining around them as a "*Guiding Light*," directing them to Mary and Joseph and the infant in a manger. *What child is this?* He is Emmanuel, *God with us*, and we will celebrate that God has entered the *Days of Our Lives* with *One Life to Live*.

Today we draw very close to Christmas. The candles on the outer ring are now all in place, all four, finishing the circle. These four weeks represent the long wait of the Hebrews for the promised Messiah, all circumstances now in place and the prophecy ready to be fulfilled. Paul urged the Galatian Christians to think of Jesus' birth in this way, saying, "When the fullness of time was come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman."

The word *circumstance* is a Latin hybrid from *circum* (circle) and *stance* (to stand). With the four Advent candles now lit, they "stand in a circle" around the Christ Candle.

We who once stood at *The Edge of Night*, are now ready for the *Guiding Light* that will take us to our destination.

"God in flesh appearing" we will sing tomorrow night as we open our Christmas Eve service with "O Come, All Ye Faithful." The Word made flesh, living a life . . . *One Life to Live*.

Quite a scandal, using the words "God" and "flesh" in the same sentence. Paul wrote much about the *scandalon* of the

onelife
tolive



incarnation. Christianity is no mere philosophy, but makes a stunningly simple claim, that in Jesus, God is with us . . . Emmanuel . . . with *One Life to Live*. The Word is now flesh. Not flesh as a metaphor. Real, flesh. Hit it and it bruises flesh. Pinch it and it hurts flesh. Stress it and it aches flesh. Cut it and it bleeds flesh.

At Christmas our language becomes plain and simple, leaving philosophy behind, inviting us to dirty our hands with the straw of the manger, to fill our nostrils with the scent of the animals, to feel the texture of the moment, to experience it with our senses. I love that when pilgrims today enter the nave Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity, commissioned in 327 A. D., they stoop to enter under the shallow door, as if the church itself and what it commemorates is pushing us toward the ground just as Jesus had to empty himself, in pure humility, to be born. In the early 16th century the entrance, still visible in outline, was lowered to prevent horses from entering.

Then, entering the vast nave of the church we make our way slowly, slowly, waiting to enter the grotto, the cave, beneath the altar, where we descend once more. The trajectory of the pilgrim's experience is downward, and the timing is usually very slow.

It reminds me of Paul's words to the Philippians, "*He who thought it not robbery to be equal with God, emptied himself to become a servant . . . and being found as a servant he became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.*"



How quickly theology takes us from Christmas to Easter, from birth to death, as we will see tomorrow, not finishing even an hour-long service of celebration of Jesus' birth until we remember his death in Holy Communion. We will take the newborn Jesus to the grave in the space of an hour, learning that God's *One Life to Live* was God's *One Life to Give*.

Our reading today from Hebrews 10 is a declaration that since the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin, "*Consequently, when Christ came into the world he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings you did not desire, but a body you have prepared for me.'*" Here is Jesus' pre-mission statement, as if the Captain of our Salvation held a news conference in heaven prior to his mission departure, emptying himself to become a human. Then we learn that "*We are sanctified by the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, once and for all*" (Hebrews 10:10). God's *One Life to Live* was God's *One Life to Give*.

I find it fascinating that there is no recorded birth in the Bible after Jesus. Have you ever thought about that? My academic focus was Hebrew and in the Hebrew Bible, a.k.a. the Old Testament. Here we have a deluge of birth records and birth stories. Of the birth of Isaac we learn the reason for his name, "*he laughed.*" Abraham and Sarah were old, unbelieving that they could bear a child, and the thought of it was so miraculous that they laughed. We learn of Isaac's two boys Jacob and Esau, twins struggling in Rebekah's womb, "*two nations are in your womb.*" Esau was born first with Jacob holding his heel as if trying to pull him back.

Near this same Bethlehem Jacob's wife Rachel goes into labor and dies after giving birth to her second son, the younger brother of Joseph. She calls him Benoni, *Son of my suffering*, but Jacob calls him Benjamin, *Son of my right hand*. This is a sacred spot our pilgrims travel by today, Rachel's Tomb, just above it a kibbutz called Ramat Rachel (The heights of Rachel). It's a beautiful overlook of Bethlehem where Phillips Brooks in 1860s gazed at the city and wrote, *O Little Town of Bethlehem*.

We learn also of Moses' birth, born to a Hebrew woman in Egypt and spared death contrary to the edict of Pharaoh, placed into a little papyrus basket to float in the Nile where he is recovered by Pharaoh's daughter and named Moses, "*Drawn from the water.*"

Those merely scratch the surface of a Hebrew text full of birth notices. Genealogies are everywhere. Here a begat, there a begat, everywhere a begat, begat. We're told of the birth of patriarchs, of prophets, of priests, and of kings. Right up to Jesus.

The New Testament has the birth narrative of John the Baptist, Jesus' cousin. How Zechariah, struck dumb because of his disbelief in the miracle, prays the Benedictus at his birth.

*You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way . . .*

Then, a few months after John's birth, we read of Jesus' birth, as we did this morning from Matthew's gospel. After Jesus, what other birth need be told? We're not told of Peter's birth, or John or Paul or Timothy or Silas. No more do we read of the ritual of parent's naming of their children. Nothing, no birth record in the Bible after the angel revealed to Joseph, "*You shall call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins.*"

One thing I've found interesting about *One Life to Live*, which aired on ABC from 1968 to 2012, more than 43 years and over 11,000 episodes. It was the first soap opera to deal seriously with societal issues, featuring ethnically and socio-economically diverse individuals. I think that's perfect for my purposes this morning, that's God's *One Life to Live* was in the midst of fractured, broken world.

In the Church of the Nativity is St. Jerome's Cave, a grotto near the cave of Jesus' birth. There Jerome spent 30 years of his life translating the scriptures from the Hebrew and the Greek, beginning in 386 when the church was barely 50 years old. He produced there The Vulgate, the most enduring translation of all time. In the word Vulgate you hear the word, vulgar. This is not because Jerome used improper language. No, but vulgar means common, for he sought to bring the word to the people in their common tongue. It was the authoritative version of the Roman Catholic Church until the 20th century, Jerome becoming the Patron Saint of translators, librarians, and encyclopedists.

When I'm there I like to point out to our pilgrims the inscription, "*The Word became flesh.*" Jerome sought to spend his life making the word real. Jerome had only *One Life to Live*, and this is what he chose to do with it.

Each of us has only *One Life to Live*, so I suppose the question to end with is, what will I do, what will you do with your *One Life to Live*? How shall we make our lives count for Christ?