

From the Pastor's Desk

From the Pastor: Paul's Christmas Story

Hindsight is 20/20. How many times have you heard that, or said it? Like most clichés, this statement has become a cliché because it is so profoundly true. While we are in the midst of a “situation,” it is difficult or maybe even impossible to see how we got into such a mess or how to get out of it. But years down the road, as we look back, suddenly we can see the wrong turn we took or the unfortunate choice we made, and we can avoid making the same mistake again. (Or at least that's the hope.)

However, hindsight is not only valuable with difficult situations. Scanning back over our lives, we can see and value even more those people who guided us. We can begin to appreciate how wise and timely their advice and guidance were to us. We can be grateful for the maturity we gained in working through problems and see how pleasure and pain, adversity and opportunity shaped, matured, and molded us.

The New Testament is a collection of documents written by authors who had the benefit of hindsight. Think about it. New Testament scholars like to point out that the entire New Testament was written from the perspective of the resurrection. In other words, the New Testament's authors saw the earthly Jesus through the experience of the risen Christ. And in the light of the resurrection, they radically reevaluated not only their own Jewish heritage but all of human experience.

J. Barry Vaughn taught introduction to New Testament. He began by asking his students, “What did Paul know about Jesus?” He would then delight in watching the expressions on their faces grow more and more puzzled as they realized how little Paul tells us about the earthly Jesus. It's true -- Paul tells us nothing about angels appearing to Mary and Joseph, nothing about the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, nothing about shepherds and magi. Paul sums up the Christmas story in these words from Romans: “the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David ... was declared to be Son of God ... by resurrection from the dead.” Paul tells us that we must read the Christmas story from the perspective of Easter. The Christmas story is one of the most beloved stories in the bible and yet, we would know nothing of the birth of an infant to a poor couple in an obscure town in Roman-occupied Palestine two thousand years ago, if that infant had not grown to be a man who preached the coming of the kingdom, healed the sick, invited sinners into his fellowship, died on a cross, and above all, rose from the dead. The light that shone on the manger was a reflection of the light from the empty tomb.

For centuries the church has wisely put the four Sundays of Advent before Christmas, so that we can hear the message of the prophets, so that we can remember that we need to prepare our hearts with repentance before we hear the song of the angels, and so that we can work our way backward from Easter to Christmas, from the empty tomb to the manger.

In Advent, we literally go “back to the future.” Advent is dominated by images of Christ's second coming “in power and great glory.” We go forward to the second coming, so that we can return to his first coming as the helpless babe of Bethlehem, because the paradox is that the king coming in glory was cradled in Mary's arms, and the infant staring up from a manger is already the great king who will save the world.

So, we prepare to go to the manger by going to the cross and tomb. In Advent, we remember that just as we were born, so shall we die. But resurrection is promised to those who live and died with their hearts full of faith in the message of Christmas and Easter.

Take time this Advent season, in the midst of all the hustle and bustle, to prepare anew for the coming of our Savior. In hindsight, you won't regret it.

Advent blessing lead to Christmas joy, *Pastor Karen*

