ADVENT JOURNEYS

CHRISTMAS AT THE CROSSROADS

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Pundits and prophets agree: November’s Presidential Election results were monumental. On one side of the great American political divide there was elation; on the other, gloom and pessimism. A month later, a shadow of fear blots out Christmas joy for too many folks. It’s as if the Spirit of Christmas *Future* drags us, like old Ebenezer Scrooge, to the edge of America’s freshly dug grave. The faceless spirit points a skeletal finger to words etched across the nation’s tombstone:

**Fiscal Cliff...$16.5 Trillion Debt...Economic Collapse**

Be careful! We are no better prepared to forecast what will happen next than were ancient Roman priests who examined the entrails of sacrificed goats to predict the future.

I never want to forget the year 1809. Nor should you.

The attention of the world was riveted on European battlefields. The bigger-than-life players on the center stage of history in 1809 were Lord Admiral Nelson, the Duke of Wellington, and the Russian Czar. The future was being shaped in places like Paris, Moscow, and London. In 1809, the name on everyone’s lips was Napoleon Bonaparte, the mad military genius who was hell-bent on conquering the world. From Trafalgar to Waterloo, people were bracing for the fall of Austria. Stock markets collapsed, governments fell, and prophets of doom predicted the end of the world.

Babies were also being born in 1809. But no one thought much about babies when the map of Europe was being rearranged by Napoleon. Maybe someone should have noticed.

In the Gladstone house in Liverpool, baby William was born. Who could have known in 1809 that little Willie Gladstone would grow up to be England’s greatest Prime Minister and turn Great Britain into a world empire where the sun never set.

A few miles away, an English country doctor by the name of Darwin brought his newborn to the parish church to be christened. The priest never imagined in 1809 that baby Charles Darwin would grow up to reshape science and change the way the world looks at the origins of man.

In Lincolnshire, Alfred Lord Tennyson drew the first breath of a life that would produce the greatest literature that the world had ever read.

While the world was fixated on Napoleon, another French boy was born east of Paris. Little Louis Braille was headed for an accident that would blind him at age three. No one guessed in 1809 that the Braille baby would one day create a system of raised dots and dashes that would free millions of sightless people from prisons of darkness.

As German refugees fled Napoleon’s onslaught, a baby’s first cries were heard in the Mendelssohn house in Hamburg. As rockets exploded in the distance, no one was thinking that baby Felix would grow up to write music that made the whole world sing.

Across the ocean in Boston, Massachusetts, Edgar Allen Poe began his tragic but brilliant life in 1809. A few miles away in Cambridge, Oliver Wendell Holmes wore his first diapers. Years later he would don the robes of the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court and become the preeminent jurist in American history. And, in a log cabin in the backwoods of Kentucky, a farm laborer first heard the cries of his newborn boy, Abraham Lincoln.
All those babies, and many more, were born in 1809. But who cared? The eyes of the world were on the battlefields of Austria, not on little babies born in small places. Perhaps you remember this Pulitzer Prize winning cartoon: two grizzled frontiersmen are talking over a split rail fence. One says, “Any news from Hardin County, Kentucky?” The other replies, “Not much, ‘cept Tom and Mary Lincoln had a baby boy named Abe. Nuthin’ much ever happens over in Hardin County.”

Who would have cared about a baby born in Bethlehem? Everyone’s focus was on a worldwide census decreed by a Roman Emperor. The big players on the center stage of history were Caesar Augustus, King Herod, and the powerbrokers of Persia. The future was shaped in places like Rome, Athens, and Jerusalem. Imagine two travelers meeting on a Palestinian road. One says, “Any news from Nazareth?” The other replies, “Not much, ‘cept Joe the carpenter and his wife Mary had a baby boy named Jesus. Nuthin’ much ever happens over in Nazareth.”

Who cared about a baby born to a carpenter and his teenage bride? God did. Caesar Augustus was just a pawn in his cosmic plan to save the world. While mighty Rome was busy trying to change history, God was creating it in tiny Bethlehem. It’s too bad that a world fixated on Alexander the Great, Herod the Great, and Augustus the Great overlooked Mary’s little lamb.

If Christmas teaches us anything, it is this: it’s not always the major players and the big events that shape our future. Barak Obama’s electoral victory may not be as big a deal as we think. What happens to the Republicans might not be as significant as the talking heads want us to believe. Like the folks in 1809, we focus on epic battles, generals, admirals, and big politicians. Like people at the dawning of the First Century, we get caught up in the shenanigans of our version of Caesar Augustus and Herod the Great. But little people in out-of-the-way places are doing things that may be far more significant to our future.

Earth-shattering history was being made in a log cabin in Hardin County, Kentucky. The history of the world was turned on its head because a baby was born in a stable in Bethlehem. Christmas obliterates everything that happened on November 6th in 2012, and reduces it to a minor footnote in the grand scheme. History belongs to God. Both world history and your personal history is really His Story. St. Paul grasped this epic truth in a letter that he wrote to the First Century church in Galatia. He gives us the first principle in our Christmas series, Advent Journeys:

**God’s intentional journey takes us to intentional places.**

These past weeks we have been focusing on our intentional journey. Covenant’s mission is crystal clear: *Developing fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ.* Our vision statement defines what a disciple looks like. He or she is a vital part of a loving family, dependent on the Holy Spirit, committed to the Word, growing in grace, and reaching out in mercy.

It’s one thing to want to be such a disciple; it’s quite another to get there. We believe that Jesus lays out the pathway of discipleship in John 14:6—“I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me.” Jesus says there are four essentials to becoming a *fully devoted* disciple: 1) **Worship**—by connecting to the *Way* we will be filled with his power and presence to take us all the way. 2) **Grow**—by growing in the
Truth we will stay on the straight and narrow Way. 3) **Serve**—if we live out the Life of Christ, we will serve God and others, just as he did. 4) **Go**—if we live out the Life of Christ we will go to the world to reach God’s lost children with the gospel, just as he did.

We have talked about the first three: worship, grow, and serve. In this Advent series we will focus on the fourth: **Go!** Going is at the heart of Christmas. When God grabs hold of folks—whether it is Mary or the Magi or me—we will go to places that we never dreamed of. The Son of God left heaven to go into the womb of a Jewish girl. Before his advent journey was over 33 years later, he would go to a cross where he descended into hell itself. None of us knows where discipleship will take us. We are intentional about going, but only God knows where he will take us.

History also is on an intentional journey. Postmodern Existentialists would tell you that history meanders meaninglessly. German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote cynically, “History is written by the victors.” Hinduism poses a view of history that has become popular in Western thought: history goes in circles, and individuals go through reincarnations. Spanish philosopher George Santana famously wrote, “Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.” The rock group, **Blood Sweat and Tears** sang this golden oldie, Spinning Wheel: “What goes up must come down. Spinnin’ wheel got to go ‘round.”

But the biblical view is radically different. World history, and your personal history, does have meaning because it’s His Story. History never meanders meaninglessly, or goes in circles. Winners may write their own version, but history doesn’t belong to them. All of history is God’s history. It moves in a straight line inexorably toward the birth of a baby in Bethlehem, intersecting the place of that baby’s crucifixion 33 years later, marching purposely onward toward his Second Coming. Nothing happens by accident. Kingdoms rise and nations fall in perfect cadence to the drumbeat of history. There are no loose threads in the fabric of your personal history or world history because it’s a master design woven by a Master Designer. Let’s see how St. Paul expresses this doctrine of history:

1. **AN ETERNAL PLAN.**

   My version of the NIV Bible says in Galatians 4:4, “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son…” Other versions say, “…when the time had fully come…” or “…in the fullness of time…” The original language could be translated as the right time, or the perfect time, or the exact time.

   Isn’t it interesting how most of our clocks are circular in shape? Circles go round and round. Our history repeats itself because we never learn. We do the same stupid things again and again. George Santana was right: we don’t learn from the lessons of history so we are doomed to repeat the mistakes of the past. Maybe our biggest mistake of all is that we think we have time to correct things in this never-ending circle of repeating history.

   But Galatians 4:4 says, “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son…” There was a set time for Jesus to come the first time, and there is a set time for him to come again. Think of that phrase fullness of time. There comes a moment when a single second can no longer be crammed into time. Time is full up like a balloon, ready to burst into an eternity where there will be no more time. On his deathbed, Moses prayed to God, “Teach us to number our days…” (Psalm 90:12) The set time will fully come for us too
when not a single second will be left in the clock that is ticking down to eternity. Are you ready? Eternity is an infinite timelessness—horribly long to spend separated from God, in a place of utter darkness, despair and emptiness.

But today the clock of your life span is still ticking. In Charles Dickens’ Christmas Carol, the old miser Ebenezer Scrooge is taken by the Ghost of Christmas future to see his awful end. He cries out, “Why show me this, if I am beyond all hope?” There is always hope, as long as the clock still ticks. But, when the fullness of time has passed, so has hope. Dante writes in his Divine Comedy that the gateway to hell is inscribed with these words: “Abandon hope, all ye who enter here.”

But a loving God doesn’t want his lost children to go to a place of hopelessness. St. Paul tells us in verses 4&5 that history has a single purpose: “But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law…” Everything that comes to pass, even the recent elections in the United States, have a single purpose: God saves a people and redeems his creation.

Even things that seem crazily evil ultimately will make sense. Joseph’s brothers sold him into slavery. He spent 12 years in prison on false charges. Through a set of amazing circumstances, he became the Prime Minister of Egypt. Had he not been in his position, his fellow Jews would have died of starvation up in Canaan. Had the Jews not been in Egypt for 400 years, Moses never would have been born to experience a life that prepared him to lead 2.5 million Jews out of slavery to their Promised Land. Israel never would have become a nation. Jesus wouldn’t have come to Bethlehem, and we wouldn’t be here 4,000 years later.

Could Joseph’s rise from slave to prison to Prime Minister be attributed to mere coincidence? Joseph didn’t think so. When the brothers stood before him, he said in Genesis 50:19&20, “Don’t be afraid. Am I not in the place of God? You intended to harm me, but God meant it for good to accomplish what is now being done for the saving of many lives.” One day we too will stand in glory and look back at tragedies in our own lives, and see them as fitting into the perfect timeline of history, moving purposely and inexorably toward the glorious end that God had in mind all along.

Galatians 4:4 says, “When the set time had fully come…” Even the stars were aligned perfectly. We read in Matthew’s Christmas story that the Magi saw his star in the east and came to worship Jesus. These astrologers from Persia were as far from God as any pagans could be. Yet God drew them to his Son by using the very stars that they worshipped. From 7 BC to 2 AD, the planets aligned themselves in a way that only happens once in several thousand years. Astronomers now know that the solar systems synced with the Magi’s astrological charts—Jupiter, king of the planets aligned with Mars, the planet of war, in the constellation of Pisces, which represented Israel. Scholars tell us that for two years after Jesus’ birth, this burst of solar light shown brightest over Palestine.

These Magi didn’t know the Bible, but they could read the stars. They knew that the Warrior King of all kings had been born in Israel. But could they have known exactly where to go if the Babylonians had not destroyed Israel some 500 years before and taken them into captivity? The prophets wept over the destruction of Israel. But one of those Israeli captives, Daniel
became a Magi in Babylon. So the Jewish Scriptures, including many Old Testament prophecies that were written in Babylon, were handed down from Daniel to these First Century Magi. After reading the stars, they searched the Scriptures to discover a dot on the map called Bethlehem. Like the stars in the heavens, history on earth lines up in perfect symmetry.

We pass over Luke 2:1&2 as a throwaway part of the Christmas story: “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.” It was this census that forced Joseph to go to Bethlehem with his pregnant wife Mary. Who would have thought that Roman politics would be part of redemptive history?

No one would have guessed that Julius Caesar’s assassination on the floor of the Roman senate would have anything to do with Bethlehem 44 years later, or the spread of Christianity over the next several hundred years. Caesar’s death plunged the Roman world into 15 years of civil war. His ruthless godson, Octavian emerged victorious from that titanic struggle. He neutralized the power of the senate, and Rome ceased to be a republic. He became the first emperor of Rome and its virtual dictator. He then changed his name to Augustus, which in Latin means, “I am the greatest.” After the Senate declared him a god, he set out to create the Pax Romana, a one-world government that would bring peace on earth.

Caesar Augustus built the most powerful empire in history, instituting a census of the Roman world in order to keep tabs on everyone. He wanted to register everyone for a new round of taxes to build larger armies, bigger cities, and the greatest road system in history. The Rome he expanded was the iron beast that Daniel saw in his visions centuries before. Augustus is a prototype of the final Anti-Christ to come. His dream is a foreshadowing of a final one-world government. One day a great charismatic leader like Augustus will rise up to promise world peace and cobbled together a global political and economic system. Just as Augustus’ Rome later crucified Jesus and martyred thousands of Christians down through the centuries, so this final one-world government will launch the greatest tribulation that the church has ever experienced. Just as Augustus’ census was essential to the first advent of Christ, so the American elections on November 6, 2012 are critical to the Second Coming of Christ. We should rejoice like the Shepherds who came to the stable, for our final redemption is at hand.

But, just as Augustus and his successors failed to turn history against the King born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago, so will the antichrists of our day. Pontius Pilate had Christ crucified, and he arose on the third day. Later Roman persecutions scattered followers of Christ across the world. They carried the gospel across roads that Augustus built from taxes born of the census that brought Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. They went to the cities Augustus had built, using the common language that Augustus had decreed. Scholars say that at no other time in history were the conditions so ripe for such a rapid spread of the gospel. Within 350 years after Augustus ordered his census of the world, Rome had been Christianized. In the end, the story of kings and kingdoms is really His Story. So why do you worry about world events that seem to unravel before your eyes today? Do you still think that they make no sense? St. Paul wants us to know that every day that history is made is a grand unveiling of God’s redemption on the move toward its final culmination!
2. AN ONLY CHILD.

Verse four continues, “...God sent his Son...” John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son...” That phrase Only Begotten has mystified theologians down through the ages. Maybe the French Bible says it best: Fils unique—the unique or one and only Son. There is no one else like Jesus. He is the Incomparable Christ. John 1:2 says that he was “with God in the beginning.” The Greek word for with could be translated, “he was face to face with God—God to God, the same in substance, and equal in power and glory.” In the beginning, when the very first things were created, the Son already existed—infinite and eternal God. No wonder history moves relentlessly to prepare the way for him to enter the womb of the Virgin Mary, then arranges the perfect conjunction of stars to bring worshippers to his cradle, the exact juxtaposition of ancient politics to bring him to his cross, and the unbridled ambitions of a Roman demigod to prepare the way for his gospel to be spread throughout the world. And today, Jesus is still the Incomparable Christ. History still moves, even in the tiniest details of babies born in out-of-the-way places and in things you hardly notice, to bring the Only Son worth worshipping back in glory to a redeemed earth. So why do you worry about tomorrow when it is all part of His Story?

3. A HUMAN CHILD.

Verse four goes on to say, “...born of a woman...” He was fully God, but also fully human. He who was infinite and eternal became a two-celled zygote in a woman’s womb. Light itself became enveloped in total darkness. The God who spangled the night skies with zillions of stars, and dug the mighty oceans, became a helpless baby. The Word of God couldn’t even form the simplest syllables. He wet his diapers and clung to his mother’s breast like any other child. We call this the Incarnation—from two Latin words in and carne (or flesh). God took on human flesh.

No other religion has such a doctrine. It would be absurd if it weren’t so brilliant. Since Adam and Eve ruined Paradise, humanity has been hell-bent on destroying what was left. In 6,000 years of recorded history there have been less than 360 years of peace on earth. More than four billion people have been killed in wars that left the environment in shambles. So God stepped out of heaven and became a man to save man. He identified with our struggles and pains by going through them. Verse four goes on to say, “...born under the law...” In spite of monumental poverty and pain, he lived a perfect life by obeying God in the most meticulous details. He did what the first Adam couldn’t do, and we still find impossible to do. After living a perfectly righteous life, he died a perfectly obedient death on a cross, carrying our sins into the deepest hell where they were buried once and for all. He then did what no man has ever been able to do: he conquered our last and greatest enemy—death itself!

History stands in awe at the tomb, and then rushes on to set the stage for the spreading of the gospel of salvation: because the Son of God became a son of Eve, then children of Eve everywhere can become the sons and daughters of God! So why do we put our trust in politicians, Wall Street bankers, the Dow Jones, or Fox News when the very history we fear most is rushing toward the return of our King! Why do we waste ourselves in the schemes of fallen humanity, when we can take the gospel of true redemption...
to a needy world? Be done with lesser sons like Barak Obama and Mitt Romney, and live for the only Son that matters!

4. A JEWISH REDEEMER.

St. Paul is almost breathless with excitement when he plows on in verse five: “to redeem those under the law that we might receive adoption to sonship.” He came to Jews who were under the Law of Moses. He did what no other Jew could ever do: he kept the Law, and did away with its stranglehold so that the whole world could be saved by grace alone. God remembered the promise he had made to Abraham some 2,000 years before. The old man would provide the seed for a nation that would birth a Savior for the whole world. God has not forgotten the Jewish people. He not only gave a promise of salvation that includes us, he promised a land to Abraham’s Jewish descendants. He reiterated that promise to Isaac, and again to Jacob. He repeated it to Moses and the prophets that followed. Though the church has become the spiritual heirs to Israel, God has not forgotten his specific promises to the Jews. Twice Israel has died as a nation: a half a century before Christ when the Assyrians and Babylonians carried its inhabitants away as slaves, and then in 70 AD when the Romans put a second end to Israel. No other nation in history has ever died and come back to life again. But Israel has done it twice. It is one of the miracles of history. But remember, history is His Story: It is amazing that this little sliver of land between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River is still at the epicenter of geo-political action. All of history rushes toward Armeggedon in the Israeli Valley of Jezreel. The Doomsday Clock is ticking down the last seconds of His Story. Are you ready? Are you about your Father’s business of going to those who don’t know what you know about history? One thing is true: in the fullness of time He will come again!

5. A FINAL QUESTION.

St. Paul ends with a stunning conclusion: every moment of history has been precisely arranged for your benefit! May I repeat that: history is also Your Story. Verses 6&7 focus on you: “Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out Abba Father. So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child, and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.” I look back on my own life, and think of all the things that were awful, senseless in a dysfunctional childhood gone crazy. Yet every event was pushing me relentlessly toward the open arms of Jesus. That would be enough to make me realize how valuable I am to the God of heaven. But to think that all of history, from the moment Adam and Eve were created, was orchestrated to bring me home to my Father’s house, is overwhelming. When Caesar was assassinated God was thinking of me. When Augustus ordered a census of the world, God was planning my future. When the solar systems moved into perfect conjunction over Bethlehem’s stable, God was putting together my adoption papers. When the disciples moved across the road systems of the Pax Romana they were bringing the gospel one step closer to me. Indeed history is also My Story.

Have you made it your story? Will you let this redemptive history push you out the door to go its steps to bring His Story to others who are waiting for a divine appointment with history?