

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Christmas Around the Universe
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Isaiah 66:18-21; Luke 2:8-14

It was sitting in a St. Louis car museum looking for someone to love on it. It was a 1954 Corvette Roadster. It needed someone to love on it because it needed considerable work. The interior needed replacing. One of the engine's cam lobes had worn off. The electrical wiring needed repair and replacing...meaning none of the dash lights worked. The old automatic transmission was in need of parts and it was even missing some small screws around the headlamp. As I said, it needed someone to love on it if it was to ever be brought back to life...to become as good as new. Fortunately, that 54' Vette found the perfect person to restore it...our own Mark Reuss. Mark did all of the work himself, lovingly and carefully replacing the interior and repairing the mechanicals. In the end, the 54" was as good as new. Probably as beautiful and functional as when it rolled off the assembly line the year before I was born...just thought I would throw that in. And I know that Mark is not alone in these kinds of endeavors; of taking an older car, or perhaps a piece of furniture and restoring them to their original condition. It is an act of love and passion...the same kind of love and passion that God has for restoring this world...this creation...this universe. And we know this because the scriptures tell us that this is what God is doing in the world; that God is going to fix what we broke.

This image that God is going to repair the world is what this book (the Bible) is all about. It is the story of a loving God who cares deeply for heaven and earth and desires that they be made as good as new. We can see this in Isaiah's words, "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain as before says the Lord." I realize that it might seem strange to talk about repairing and restoring both heaven and earth, but what the scriptures tell us is that human sin broke not only this creation but it impacted heaven as well, when it broke the intimate relationship that is supposed to exist between God and creation. One way to think about this is that heaven and earth are not supposed to be two separate realms, but a single entity in which God is so close to human beings that we get to hang out together. We get to live in unity. And it is that reality, that potential closeness with God that had given the people of God hope. And if anyone needed that hope, it was the people of God, because they not only saw the brokenness of creation, but they were living it. Their nation had been crushed by Babylon and people taken into exile. When the people returned under the Persians they were still opposed and persecuted by their neighbors. Survival was a daily struggle. Under these conditions the people struggled to hold on to their belief that God still loved them and had a plan for them...so they looked for the promised sign that the restoration was about to begin.

What I mean by a sign is that throughout the writings of Isaiah, there were promises that the people would know that the restoration project was about to begin when they received "the sign." We see this in verses 18 and 19 where Isaiah writes, "For I know their work and their thoughts and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues and they shall come and see my glory, and I will set a sign among them..." The only problem with this waiting for the sign was that Isaiah was never abundantly clear as to exactly what that sign was to be. So the people kept looking for that clear sign that said "God at work."

Was the sign their return from exile in Babylon? No nothing happened. Was the sign the rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem? No, nothing happened. Was the sign the desecration of the Temple by the Greeks? No, nothing happened. Was the sign political independence under the Maccabees? No, nothing happened. The failure of all of these signs caused many to give up and lose hope. But there were still those who looked, who waited, who longed for the sign that God was going to restore the heavens and the earth...and so it was to some of those who waited, to some shepherds in the fields, that the sign finally arrived.

Most of us know the story. The shepherds and in the fields watching their flocks by night when the angel appears and says, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in the manger." Even the Charlie Brown Christmas special knows this part of the story. But what we may not have known was the reference point for the "sign." What did it mean that there will be a sign? A sign of what? Now you know the answer. This is the sign that God had long promised, that God would begin the loving and careful recreation of heaven and earth. God would begin the restoration of a universe in which humans and God could hang together in love and blessing. The sign had arrived, but it would not be the one and only sign. I say this because Jesus' ministry was pretty much one big sign of this restoring work. How so? When Jesus healed someone, they were made good as new. When Jesus forgave someone, they were as good as new. When Jesus cast out the demons from the man in Gentile territory, he was made good as new. When Jesus fed the hungry, they were made good as new. In a sense, just like Mark worked on each part of the car that needed restoring, Jesus worked on each part of humanity that needed restoring, body, mind and soul. And finally, the greatest sign of all, which was the cross which culminated Jesus work of making it possible for all of humanity to be joined as one. This is why in the Gospel of John all of Jesus mighty acts are called signs.

Unlike Mark's restoration of the 54' Vette, which I suppose is finished, God's restoration of creation is an ongoing project. It is a slow, deliberate and loving project in which God is engaged. And it is a project in which we are invited to partake. We are invited to participate in God's work...by helping to connect heaven and earth. I realize that may seem a bit odd but remember that the goal of this restoration is to have heaven and earth connect so we can hang with God. And we get to do that by lifting up and pouring out. We do this by lifting up those around us and those far from us, to God in prayer. When we do this, we are following Jesus' example of praying for himself, his disciples and the world. The image often used is that prayers ascend like smoke drifting into the presence of God. It is as if our prayers help to focus heaven's attention on the needs of the world. The second part of this is that we pour out God's love into the world around us. For you see as we connect with heaven through prayer, worship, and meditation, it opens a highway for God's love to be poured out upon us. This love allows us not only to love God but to love neighbor in new and amazing ways. And when we do, we too become signs. We become signs that God's recreative work is in progress and by so doing we offer hope to an often-weary world.

My challenge for each of us then on this Sunday before Christmas is to ask ourselves, How am I being a sign to the world? How am I lifting up and pouring out so that God's universal creation looks a little bit more like it is as good as new tomorrow than it does today?