

Sacred: Doing

The last in an Advent/Christmas sermon series
by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
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- Matthew 2:1-12 ¹¹ They went into the house, and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshiped him. They brought out their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, and presented them to him.
- Revelation to John 21:1-5a ³ I heard a loud voice speaking from the throne: "Now God's home is with people! He will live with them, and they shall be his people. God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. ⁴ He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared."
- Sermon-in-a-sentence: The things we do in Jesus' name are sacred because they embody God's love for all creation.

November 29, 2015 was the first Sunday of the recent season of Advent. As I sat up here at the beginning of that worship service and watched as Susan and Jim Pierce brought flame to the first Advent candle, I remember thinking, "It's forever until Christmas Eve! We have today, of course, *and* three more Sundays. Nearly four full weeks before we reach the summit of this 'Advent Mountain'."

And then, as seems to happen every year, the four Sundays of Advent just flew by. Christmas Eve (with its three services) flew by. The week between Christmas and New Year's really flew by. Now here we are on this "Ninth Day of Christmas." Like many churches, on this Sunday we choose to celebrate January 6th's "Twelfth Day of Christmas" called Epiphany. And now it seems like the First Sunday of Advent was just a few days ago.

During this season our worship focused on the theme of "Sacred": we explored the special, sacred *time*, sacred *people*, sacred *space*, sacred *knowing* and sacred *being* that draw us toward God's will for the world. We contemplated how God has fashioned our lives to serve that plan.

Today's concluding installment is where "the rubber meets the road," as they used to say: "sacred doing." How is what we do supposed to be sacred?

Consider two biblical examples of people first receiving the news about God's love embodied in Jesus, then internalizing the message, and finally acting upon it: consider the shepherds and the Wise Men.

The shepherds received a bizarre message in a most unusual way: a messenger from the realm of the divine pierced through the veil of human existence and announced a savior in the form of a helpless infant. We wouldn't be surprised if the shepherds' response to the angelic visitation was something like, "Man, let's sleep this one off" or, "Tarik, that stew you made tonight – what *were* those spices you put into it?" That "good news of a great joy" ... the shepherds could have blown it off, rolled over, pulled their tunics tighter around their necks and drifted off to sleep.

But that's not what they did. Instead, they said, "You know what?... let's go! C'mon! Now!! Let's go up to Bethlehem and see this... this 'thing' that's happened!"

And as for the Magi, the Wise Men, Matthew's gospel simply reports that they arrived in Jerusalem. Matthew didn't describe the moment of their astronomical discovery. Matthew didn't document the deliberations which led to their decision to mount up and travel across the vast barren wilderness to reach Jerusalem, the chief city of the Judean region. No, Matthew's gospel simply reports that they arrived in Jerusalem

But this much is clear from both the response of the shepherds and that of the Magi: God's message of hope, God's promise of a new chance inspired them. As a result, they chose to respond through action.

Remember what the shepherds did when they found Mary and Joseph, and the baby laid in a manger? Luke wrote, “[The shepherds] told them what the angel had said about the child.” Luke added “All who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said.” “All who heard it...” suggests that others had gathered there by this time, too: the innkeeper, perhaps; a midwife quite possibly, maybe some overserved revelers who had wandered out of the tavern and down the alley. But this unusual sight of a new family huddled in a cattle shed was given new meaning *because* of what the shepherds did: they gave their testimony, the story of their personal experience. The shepherds shared the gospel news with others when the occasion presented itself. Their witness was a sacred action – by their action they drew others to look for God’s hand at work in their own lives... down to this very day.

And the Wise Men--what did they do? How did they respond through action? Although their quest was temporarily detoured by the conniving King Herod, eventually the Wise Men were led to the place where the child was. Matthew wrote, “They went into the house [note, by the time the kings arrive, the family is in a house, not a cattle shed], and when they saw the child with his mother Mary, they knelt down and worshipped him.” [Here’s the key part.] “They brought out their gifts... and presented them to him.”

Surely you’ve seen the cartoons joking that if Mary and Jesus were visited by three “Wise Women,” the gifts would have been much more practical things like diapers, casseroles, a gift certificate for a spa day. Gold, frankincense and myrrh were worth a lot of money, but to the Wise Men the gifts were of limited value for their long journey – they couldn’t eat or drink them, or burn them for a campfire or wrap themselves in them against the desert’s cold night winds. But the Wise Men also didn’t hoard them. As Matthew made clear, “They brought out their gifts... and presented them to [the child.]” The Wise Men’s response of generosity was a sacred action – by the gospel’s account of their act of giving, they inspired others (including us) to consider how God is making similar generosity possible through our own lives.

Over these past five weeks we’ve “looked through [a] kaleidoscope of the sacred and have experienced time, people, places, knowledge, others and ourselves as God’s holy love present and incarnate in the world.”¹ God made love incarnate because God didn’t want love to be merely a concept or idea. God had love take on flesh because God intends love to be alive and active in the world through the flesh and blood of we who appreciate that we are God’s children.

Our beliefs, our attitudes, the stands we take, the actions we take can promote God’s will for all creation, such as by:

- Committing to responsible enjoyment and use and protection of the natural environment.
- Standing up for people whose place in the power pyramid prevents them from being noticed and heard and appreciated and respected.
- Being a voice and a presence for peace in situations that are steeped in anxiety, distrust, divisiveness, even hatred.
- Providing help and hope to people whose place and plight in the world economy causes them to struggle mightily just to attain self-sufficiency.
- Being the comforting embrace for people ailing, grieving, hurting, feeling lost or alone.
- As we heard from Revelation Chapter 21, announcing that God in Jesus had declared that “the old things have disappeared... and now I make all things new!”²

God has made us to be more than just human “beings;” we are made to be human “doers.” The Old Testament prophet Micah announced our duty to be “sacred doers” when he answered the question “What does the Lord require of you?” Micah’s response was “To do what is just, to show constant love, and to live in humble fellowship with our God.”³

The things we do in Jesus’ name are sacred because they embody God’s love for all creation.

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¹ Worship Design Studio “Sacred” sermon series notes

² Revelation 21:4c, 5a GNT

³ Micah 6:8 GNT