

The Story / The Heart of the Story
Sermon 1: “The Birth of a King”
March 1, 2015

I turned 60 last year. That’s pretty old! I will have been the Senior Pastor here at Capital City for 20 years this Spring. That’s a long time! Especially when I told you originally that I would stay here for 3. I’ve got quite a few wrinkles now, and most of my hair is no grey – most of which is your fault. Do you think any of that stuff has given me “dignity” yet? Do you think the word “dignity” fits me? Do you think it fits you?

I looked up the word “dignity” in the dictionary. Two of the biggest definitions were these: “worthy of honor or respect,” and “a high rank or position.” Someone who is worthy of honor, worthy of respect; or someone who is really high up. Do you qualify? Do you know anyone who qualifies? Well, I’ll show you dignity...

We’re doing a 31 week study of the storyline of the Bible called “The Story.” And it’s really cool how part 2 of The Story opens up with exactly the same words as part one of The Story. Part 1 starts like this: (Genesis 1.1 / John 1.1, 3) “In the beginning ... God.” In the beginning there was just God. Part 2 kind of expands Part 1. Part 2 starts like this: “In the beginning” ... Same words; exactly the same – because it’s same story. But, “In the beginning was the Word” ... now that sounds different. Part 1: God; Part 2: the Word. But then it says, “And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” Ah! So there’s more to this God than meets the eye.

In Part 1 it says, “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” He’s the creator God. In Part 2 it says, God created the heavens and the earth through this “Word,” who is in some way also God. Confusing isn’t it? So God did it, but he did it through the Word, who is also God. Now, if that doesn’t muddle your mind, you probably don’t get it yet.

And here’s the coup de grace. (John 1.14) It says, “This Word, this God-Word, this creator of everything Word, became a human being and made his home among us.” Are you serious?! The one who existed before creation, the one responsible for creation becomes part of creation?! And if that’s true, don’t you think he’d pretty much be the dictionary definition

for dignity: Someone who is really high up, someone who is worthy of a boatload of honor and respect? You can't get much higher up than God. And you can't be more worthy of honor and respect than God.

If that's so ... why would he enter our world as a "mamzer?" At least, that's how many people would have viewed Jesus. Do you know what a mamzer is? Every language has a word for a mamzer, and they are all ugly. In English: it's a bastard, an illegitimate child, a child of some illicit union. That would have been especially bad in Jesus' world. Now that's kind of a weird way for dignity to enter our world, isn't it? And he would die the same – without dignity! Convicted, beaten, abandoned, naked, shamed – dying the most humiliating death they had at that time. Why would "God" enter our world that way? And why would God leave our world that way?

A couple of weeks ago Scotty Blakeman recommended a book to me. It's called, "Who Is This Man," by John Ortberg – it's a really, really good book. It even has a Forward by Condaleeza Rice – pretty cool! It unpacks some ideas about Jesus that are just powerful. And one of the ideas that just got hold of me was how Jesus turned the idea of dignity on its head. He changed the world; he changed the way we think; he even changed the way people who don't follow him ... yet ... think.

It's interesting that the story of Jesus' birth features 2 kings: King Jesus, and King Herod. Only one of them would have looked "dignified" in their world.

- Herod had a noble birth; Jesus did not.
- Herod was so highly regarded by the Romans that they made him the "King of the Jews." Jesus had that title once, in mockery, when he was dying on a cross.
- Herod was the greatest builder of his day. He rebuilt the temple into something amazing (some of it is still there). He built stunning aqueducts, and nearly impregnable fortresses, and whole cities (some of their ruins are still there). Now, Jesus was a builder too, a carpenter, but there is no trace of anything he built, with his hands, any more.
- Herod was known as King of the Jews, and friend of the Romans – which is why he was the king of the Jews. Jesus was known as a friend of sinners. In that world, a man got a boatload of props for

being the King of the Jews and friend of the Romans. But in that world being “a friend of sinners” would pretty much zero out any props you had earned.

Now Herod was a mean man, a ruthless man. In that world, that was pretty common for men of dignity, and power. We think he had about 10 wives, but he only really loved one of them – and he had her executed. He also killed his one of his mothers-in-law (*shrug*), two brothers-in-law, and 2 of his sons. When his barber tried to stick up for his sons, he killed his barber. Caesar told someone that it would be safer to be Herod’s pig than one of his sons.

Herod rewarded his friends, and he was ruthless towards his enemies – which is what men of dignity did in that world. Jesus ... not so much. He was pretty hard on his friends, and he was way too gracious to his enemies. And when he was on trial before one of Herod’s sons ... he was silent, he was passive. By all their standards, this Herod had a bucket full of dignity; by all their standards, Jesus did not. But things were about to change.

The stories of these two kings -- King Herod, and King Jesus – they intertwine. (Matthew 2.2-3) These “wise men” come from the East and they ask the “King of the Jews” where they can find the “King of the Jews.” Well, Herod is ticked – “deeply disturbed,” it says, murderously mad -- because he was ruthless towards anyone who could be considered a rival.

(Matthew 2.16) So it says he sent soldiers to kill every baby boy up to two years old in and around Bethlehem. Now that’s brutal! That’s ISIS mean! His soldiers break into every home, if they find a baby boy, they run him through, or cut his throat, or crush his head. It became known as “the slaughter of the innocents,” and it is the sort of thing a man of dignity might do, in that world, to those with no dignity. Jesus escaped, but a lot of other of the “undignified” didn’t.

You see, in that world, kids didn’t matter much. In fact, on the social ladder the king – especially a king like Herod “the Great” – was pretty much the top rung. Children were pretty much at the very bottom. Children lacked the dignity of reason, they thought. The great philosopher Plato wrote about “the mob of motley appetites and pleasures and pains

one would find chiefly in children and women and slaves ” (Plato’s Republic) ... In other words, those without dignity. Children were notorious for their fear, and their weakness, and their helplessness. To be a child was to be dependent, and fragile and defenseless – all undignified.

Those are not the qualities of heroes – in the world of Jesus. A hero was someone who made things happen; a child was someone things happened to. When Hercules was a child in his cradle, he grabbed a poisonous snake in each hand and he killed them both. In two or three hundred years they were making up stories about Jesus as a child – making clay birds come alive, or striking dead some kid who bumped him. But those are the fantasies of people who were trying to give their heroes dignity as children. Our Gospels tell no such stories about Jesus. He was a fragile, vulnerable, helpless mamzer.

In that world, children just didn’t matter. In that world, some babies grew up to be women, which pretty much excluded them from education and public life. Other babies grew up to be slaves – useful for their labor, but lower on the social ladder than others like them who were free. And other babies just didn’t grow up at all – and not because their infant morality rate was so high – which it was.

In that world, unwanted children were simply left outside to die. They called it “exposure.” A dad had the right to expose any child he did not want. We’re not talking the abortion of a fetus; we’re talking putting a baby outside to die. A dad would usually make that call during the first week of a baby’s life. Did you know that in Jesus world a young baby was thought of “more like a plant than a human being.” (Plutarch)

A child was especially at risk if the family was poor – just another mouth to feed; or if the child was the wrong sex (meaning a girl in that world); or if the child was illegitimate. You see, if Joseph and Mary had not been Jews, it’s quite possible that their little mamzer – the Word of God – might have been exposed.

Abandoned children were sometimes taken to a dump, or thrown out with the ... poop, on some dung-hill. That happened often enough that hundreds of ancient names are variations of the word “koprion,” which is the Greek word for “excrement.” Sometimes babies who were especially

weak, or disabled were drowned. In fact, an ancient Roman law required that a baby that was strikingly deformed be killed quickly. Archaeologists actually discovered the bones of nearly 100 babies thrown into a sewer...

Then “the Word became a human being, and made his home among us.” And I’m telling you guys, he didn’t have to do it as a mamzer child. The “in the beginning God” can enter our world any way he chooses. He chose to become a child: fragile, vulnerable, helpless, illegitimate – doubly without dignity, doubly without rank, doubly unworthy of respect or honor ... in that world.

And when Jesus became a man – guys, even that ought to blow your mind! When God grew up and became a man – seriously! -- he treated the children like no one else. (Mt 18.1-2) One guy came up to Jesus and asks, “Who is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven?” And what Jesus told him was paradigm shattering. Jesus calls a little child – without dignity, without rank, without honor – and he puts the child in front of them. (Mt 18.3-4) And then he says (this is extreme!), “Unless you become like children, it won’t be you! In God’s kingdom (in my kingdom) whoever becomes as humble as this child – he is the greatest.”

You see, according to Jesus, it wasn’t a child’s job to grow up and earn the dignity of a Herod. It was Herod’s job to pursue the dignity ... of a child. True greatness, Jesus says, is God’s gift to those who die to appearing great. Guys, no one else – not the rabbis, not the philosophers – no one else used children as a model for greatness.

Then Jesus says something that no other man in that world would even think to say. (Matthew 18.5) He says, “Anyone who welcomes a little child like this one – who you see as without rank, unworthy of respect or honor – anyone who welcomes a little child like this one, in my name, welcomes me.” In other words, “How you see this little ... pile of excrement ... is how you see me,” he says. Unbelievable! Mind blowing! Paradigm changing!

(Mt 19.13) At another place and time some children are brought to Jesus. And even among the Jews children weren’t valued much by other parents. So Jesus’ disciples begin to scold these parents for wasting the time and the energy of their rabbi. (Mt 19.14) So Jesus scolds his disciples. “Knock it off, dorks! Leave the parents alone. Let the children come. Because ...

because God's kingdom, my kingdom, belongs to people like these! In my kingdom they have rank, they have worth, they have dignity." Imagine that: a kingdom for kids – 2000 years before Disneyland!

And the earliest Jesus followers caught on. We began treating children differently than others in that world. Maybe the earliest Christian document we have after the New Testament is called the Didache. It prohibits abortion, and exposure, and infanticide for us. Maybe the toughest of the ten commandments for a parent today is #6: Thou shalt not murder; because sometimes kids need killing. But the sentiments of Jesus followers were revolutionary! We don't kill our kids; not because the church needs more numbers, but because as one early Christian put it, "All babies are glorious before God." (Shepherd of Hermas) Really?! Another early Christian teacher instructs us not only to care for babies, but also for the poor. Do you know why? Because their poverty destroys their ability to care for their children. (Ambrose) And children are precious, to us.

Best we can tell, the average life expectancy in Jesus' world was about 30 – so there were a boatload of orphans. So we Christians began to collect money to care for them – and not just our own. At their baptism children would receive "god-parents," who would promise to care for them if their parents died. Because kids matter, to us.

And as time passed, people came to know that we are different. And instead of leaving an unwanted baby on a dung-hill, they would leave the baby in front of a church, or a monastery. Because we would take them in. And thus was born the orphanage. Because kids matter, to us. And here's what's cool, because they matter to us as time passed, they begin to matter to others, too.

You see, in Jesus' world dignity was all about rank, and rank mattered, a lot – kind of like the caste system in India. The gods ranked highest. Under them was the king – who for many of them was almost a god. Then there were the aristocrats, and the priests. Unbelievable, isn't it, that there was a time when priests were near the top of the social ladder! Then came the middle class – the artisans, merchants, craftsmen. Below them were the rest of us – peasants, slaves, women and children – the most of us, without dignity, without honor, without worth. There was this huge

dignity gap between those on top of the social ladders, and those on the bottom.

And then something happened. Our “in the beginning God” chose to become one of us. And he didn’t choose to become like Herod the Great; he chose to enter our world as a mamzer. The in the beginning God chose to look like, he chose to be thought of as, he chose to be treated like one of our lowest. Really?!

He chose to live out one of the greatest ideas of the Old Testament – an idea that they knew was there, but they didn’t live it out. The in the beginning God chose to prove to us personally that every man, every woman, every child bears the image of God, and that every person has worth. Do you understand how revolutionary that was? Do you understand how transforming that still is?

(Genesis 1.26-27) In the beginning God said, “Let us make human beings in our image, to be like us.” Who is he talking about? The kings? The aristocrats and priests? The rich and the skilled? “So God created human beings (all of us) in his own image.” And so you don’t miss it he says it again: “In the image of God he created them -- male and female, black and white, rich and poor, old and young, smart and not so smart, beautiful and not so beautiful – all of us, it says, bear God’s image!

How do you think it felt to the ladies in that world, to the slaves in that world, to the children in that world to be told that this image of God was not just the prerogative of their king, but God’s gift to you too? How do you think it would feel to begin to understand that everyone – not just those above you, but those you thought were beneath you – bears God’s image?

God not only said it, he lived it ... He came as a mamzer child. And he lived it, as he told them to bring him their children, and as he told us to become like children. And he lived it as a friend of sinners, he lived it with his grace towards women, with his grace towards the poor, with his grace towards the weak and the sick. Those ... without dignity, or so we think, matter to him. They are image of God bearers. So they began to matter to us Jesus followers – as image of God bearers.

And eventually even those who are not Jesus followers began to get it. Some Americans are Jesus followers, some are not. But all Americans affirm certain fundamental principles: “We hold these truths to be self-evident (you know the words): that all men are created equal (do you believe that); that (all men, all women, all children) they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights (do you buy that?); that among these rights are life (not abortion, not exposure, not infanticide), liberty (no man can be another man’s slave), and the pursuit of happiness.”

Where’d those ideas come from? Where’d we get the idea that men are on purpose, not accidents? Where’d we get the idea that our creator God gives every man the dignity of equal worth? These ideas were not self-evident at all in the world of Jesus. Aristotle did not think that all men were created equal. He wrote that inequality was the natural order of things. He said, “That some should rule and others be ruled is a thing not only necessary, but expedient; from the hour of birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.” What happened between Aristotle and our Declaration of Independence to turn our world upside down?

There is a philosopher at Yale named Nicholas Wolterstorff – a good Scandinavian name (that’s humor). He says, throughout history we humans tend to be tribal. We don’t naturally think of the worth of outsiders, or the rights of outsiders. We focus on me and mine. So what happened to change all this. His answer is dazzling. He says, it was the teaching of the Bible, explained by Jesus, lived by Jesus, spread by Jesus, that every human being is made in the image of God, and every human being is loved by God, which means that every human being has worth.

You see, there are gradations of talent, and strength, and intelligence, and beauty. But Martin Luther King said that “there are no gradations of the image of God.” You have worth because you bear God’s image – every one of you. You have worth because God loves you – every one of you. You want proof: the in the beginning God became like you, in fact, like the lowest of us. The in the beginning God became the friend of sinners, and women, and children, and slaves, and the sick, and all the rest of the marginal – of that world. The in the beginning God became one of us to remind us that we matter to God, that we are loved by God, and that he wants us back.

One of C. S. Lewis' heroes was George McDonald. George McDonald loved to write about princes and princesses. Someone asked him why he loved writing so much about princesses. He said, "Because every girl is a princess." Well the questioner was confused. So McDonald asked him, "What is a princess." The guy said, "Well, the daughter of a king." "Very well, then every little girl is a princess." Because every girl, and every guy too – is a child of the King. Even those of you who haven't accepted that yet.

Do you know the story of Dick Hoyt? When Dick's son, Richard, was born, the umbilical cord was wrapped around his neck. He was brain damaged; he'd never be able to walk, or to speak. In ancient Rome, by custom and by law, he'd have been discarded on a dung-heap. When he was 11 his parents took him to a university to see if they could help the boy find a way to communicate. They were told his brain was incapable of communication. Dick said, "Tell him a joke." When they did, the boy laughed. So they crafted a computer that allowed the boy to type out sentences by hitting a button with the side of his head – the only part of his body he could move.

Somehow the boy heard about a benefit race for a young guy who was paralyzed. He typed out, "Dad, I want to run." Well, his dad was already over 40, and he was not a runner. But he pushed his kid's wheelchair over the whole course (they came in next to last). After the race his boy wrote these words: "When I ran, I didn't feel disabled." So Dick Hoyt began to run, and push, and pull, and carry his son in marathons, and duathlons, and triathlons, and iron man competitions. The 2009 Boston marathon would have been their 1000th race, but they couldn't finish because of the bombing. Their best marathon time is a little over 2½ hours, within 40 minutes of the world record ... which, as one columnist put it, was not set by a guy pushing his son in a wheelchair.

The ancient Greeks loved physical excellence, and physical perfection. They are the ones who started the Olympics; they are ones who inspired the marathon. But you wouldn't find any of their stories about a race run by a man carrying his crippled son.

You see, in the beginning God became a human being, and he made his home among us, for a while. He entered our world as a mamzer, be

became known as a friend of sinners. He spent his life with the ordinary and unimpressive. He loved on lepers and cripples, prostitutes and fishermen, women and children. He proved that no matter who you are, you matter, to God; you are loved, by God; God wants you back.

He shed his “dignity,” so we could discover ours. And so we could discover theirs. So we could discover that people matter – all of them. And we will do anything – short of sin – to help them discover what it means to do life with God.