

Haslett Community Church-United Church of Christ
Third Sunday of Advent- December 17, 2006

Scripture lessons: Isaiah 60:1-3 & John 3:26-30

WHICH CITY?

In Advent of this new church year, we're starting to look again closely at the gospel story of Jesus' life. We proclaim Jesus as God in the flesh, so in learning more about him we see more of who God is.

Over the last 2000 years, Jesus' life has been studied more than any other person's in history. Over the last couple of centuries that study has become particularly intense. A wealth of detail about the wider world in which he lived has been uncovered that gives us an ever fuller and richer portrait of who he was. This morning I'd like to offer us some of that detail. It helps us to see more of who God is in Jesus Christ and who we are as Jesus' followers.

We now know more, for example, about Sepphoris. The Bible never mentions this place, but from other sources we've learned it must have been a major presence in Jesus' life, especially as he grew up. Located only a few miles from Jesus' boyhood village of Nazareth, it was one of Galilee's largest cities.

It was built up by Herod Antipas, one of the sons of Herod the Great, the Herod whom we know from the Christmas story. When Antipas was twelve years old, his father sent him to school in Rome. Rome was *the* great city of the time and its magnificence duly impressed Antipas.

Herod the Great, and his sons after him, ruled in Israel only with Rome's support and approval. Antipas understood that, so when he returned home and assumed his kingship he aimed to develop a city that would impress Rome with *his* worthiness, and Sepphoris was the result.

With 30,000 inhabitants, it included a palace, a temple, an amphitheatre, and a gymnasium. It had a mint, public baths, banks, and paved roads as well as an aqueduct and a sewer system. Josephus, the first century Jewish historian, called it the "ornament of Galilee". It was built high on a hill so its splendor could be seen for miles around.

It took a lot of money to build and maintain a city like Sepphoris. Antipas got it by taxing his subjects heavily. Most Galileans of that day were dirt poor, but it's estimated that Antipas still claimed as much as 70% of their income in taxes. When even those who owned land increasingly could not meet their tax burden, they were forced to sell and become sharecroppers. In the gospels, Jesus tells parables about landowners who go away and entrust their property to servants or slaves. Many of Jesus' listeners knew that world first hand from the sharecropper end of the stick.

Sepphoris was where most of the absentee landlords lived. They competed there in building large houses for themselves. It's no surprise that the biggest house belonged to Antipas. It's estimated that he owned between one-half and two-thirds of all the land in Galilee. You can imagine how most Galileans felt about that.

Jesus' home village of Nazareth was close to Sepphoris, but *very* different from it. With a population of about 300, made up mostly of extended families, it had no public buildings, paved roads, or sewers. Most, if not all its people, were on the economic edge. We know specifically that Jesus' family didn't have much. The gospels tell us that when the time came for Mary and Joseph to sacrifice a lamb in accord with Jewish law at the temple in Jerusalem on the occasion of their son's circumcision, they couldn't afford it. The poor were allowed to sacrifice two small birds instead, and that's what Mary and Joseph did.

Nazareth was not the ornament of anything in Galilee. Maybe you recall the story in John, chapter 1, where Philip comes to his brother Nathaniel and says, "We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth." And

Nathaniel replies, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (verses 45-46). In first-century Palestine, Nazareth had zero reputation.

Yet from it, you could see Sepphoris, clear as a bell, high on its hill only about three miles away. That's how Antipas wanted it- he wanted all the nobodies like those in Nazareth to look up day after day, see the city, be awed by it, and then stay in their place- *except* when he needed them to work on it. He conscripted laborers to build and maintain Sepphoris, and chances are high that as Jesus grew up, he and his father Joseph, as handymen, worked in Sepphoris at Herod's command.

The city's showplace was its giant, 4000-seat amphitheatre. It's likely that Jesus and Joseph helped to cut and haul the stones for it, but since Greek drama was performed there they probably never attended it. Devout Jews didn't go to Greek theatre because Greek theatre exalted Greek gods.

Many of Jesus' later sayings, however, suggest his familiarity with the conventions of the Greek stage. It's interesting that the Greek word for "actor" is *upokritis* from which we get our English word, "hypocrite". The gospels use the word *upokritis* seventeen times, and every time it's Jesus who uses it.

In Greek theatre, when famous actors entered the stage, trumpets would blow to announce their presence. In Matthew 6, verse 2, Jesus says, "So when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and the streets, so that they may be praised by others."

In Greek theatre, actors also would wear masks to disguise their faces and to show instead the characters they were playing. In Matthew 6, verse 16, Jesus says, "And when you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites do, for they disguise their faces . . . to show others that they are fasting." Jesus' exposure to Greek play-acting traditions in Sepphoris helped him to see through and warn against any play-acting we do might do in our relationship with God.

It's likely that as he grew up, Jesus also saw crucifixions in Sepphoris. In Acts, chapter 5, we hear briefly of a man named Judas the Galilean. When Jesus was about ten years old, this Judas led a revolt against Rome in which he and his followers broke into an arsenal in Sepphoris to steal weapons. The Romans responded by crucifying Judas and two thousand of his followers. From his childhood on, Jesus could see firsthand what happened to those who crossed the Romans.

And yet, undaunted, Jesus, in his adulthood, eventually begins his public ministry and gathers his own band of followers. In his day, Sepphoris was known as "the city set on a hill that cannot be hid". But to his followers, Jesus says, "You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid . . . In the same way let your light shine before others, . . . that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:14, 16).

Herod Antipas built up Sepphoris, a city set on a hill that could not be hid, to give glory to himself. Jesus also aims to build a city set on a hill that cannot be hid, but of a very different kind. His city is *us*. His city is a movement of people whose life together is meant to give glory to God.

This Jesus movement actually begins with John the Baptist. It's customary in Advent to hear from John as we did this morning in our second Scripture reading. Listening to John helps us see clearly the difference between Herod's Sepphoris and the city that Jesus builds.

Before Jesus comes, John has his own large following. Cutting the figure of an old-time prophet, he lives out in the wilderness, wears camel hair, and survives on wild locusts and honey. He preaches fiery sermons on the need for repentance and boldly includes Herod Antipas in that call.

But when Jesus comes, John steps aside. He points away from himself to Jesus and says, "Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Heeding John's word, many people start to follow Jesus instead, and some of John's followers don't like it. At the beginning of today's second Scripture they say to him, "Rabbi, the one who was with you . . . to whom you testified, here he is baptizing, and all are going to him" (John 3:26).

John's reply is beautiful, both in its substance and its imagery. He says, "You yourselves are my witnesses that I said, 'I am not the Messiah, but I have been sent ahead of him.' He who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice- for this reason my joy has been fulfilled" (verses 27-29).

In first century Jewish weddings, the friend of the bridegroom, like the best man in our weddings, had several jobs. After the ceremony, after night had fallen, the bride would be led to a tent where she would await the groom. One of the primary jobs the groom's friend had was to stand outside the tent and guard the bride until the groom arrived. No one could be allowed into the tent, except the groom. Since it was dark, the friend of the groom had to listen carefully for the groom's voice. When he heard it, only then would he step aside so the bride and groom could finally unite.

In other words, John says, "I'm not the groom. I'm not the Messiah. The bride, God's people, doesn't belong to me, so I can't know the groom's joy.

"But I am the groom's friend. I am the Messiah's forerunner. The joy of the groom's friend can be mine, and now that the Messiah's here, I do rejoice. My joy has been fulfilled." John provides his own perfect summary, saying, "He must increase, but I must decrease."

That is the kind of city the Messiah Jesus builds, starting with a man like John the Baptist. It's a people committed to the humble service of God, a people who know the great joy such service brings. Later Jesus will say, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors" (Luke 22:25). Jesus knows all about this kind of benefactor from his experience in Sepphoris. He knows it first-hand because he's helped to build such people's houses. But he says to his followers, "*Not so* with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves . . . I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:26-27).

In 1st century Jewish society, the task of washing another person's feet was considered utterly degrading. It was regarded as so demeaning that even Jewish slaves weren't required to do it. It was a task assigned only to Gentile slaves.

But what does Jesus do on his last night with his disciples? He takes off his cloak, picks up a towel and a basin, gets down on his knees and washes his disciples' feet. We've heard this story so often it's nearly impossible for us to appreciate how extraordinary it is. There are absolutely no other stories like it in the entire literature of that time, a story in which someone of higher social status, like a rabbi, washes the feet of someone of lower social status, like his disciples. Jesus' point is radical, unique, and unmistakable. He says, "I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

So which city is Jesus building? It's the one built with a towel and a basin. It's the movement of those who humbly serve just like Jesus.

Cities like Sepphoris, full of wealth, glamour, and sophistication- they come and they go. Big houses like Herod's and those of the other absentee landlords'- they come and they go, too. Jesus sees these things when he's a boy and, even then, sees right through them. He sees they're not the real thing and decides, "I'll build a different city. It won't be one made with hands, but one that shines with eternal light. It will be made up of a people who live faithful to the true God, the God who comes to them as a servant."

We are that people. As the church of Jesus Christ, we are the city that Jesus is building. So the question before each of us every day is, "How are we serving? How am I? How are you?"

In this season of Advent, maybe we're serving through our congregation's Christmas Giving Event. Maybe we're serving through one or more of the many others of our church's vital ministries. Maybe we're serving through observing a Hundred Dollar Christmas or something like it to keep our Christmas celebration in line with the reason for this season.

Maybe we're serving daily through honorable and conscientious work on our job. Maybe we're serving through the steady and gracious presence we offer every day to our families, friends, colleagues, and strangers- a presence through which we provide regular acts of kindness,

affirmation, forbearance, and forgiveness, a presence in which we refrain from any hurtful acts of ridicule, gossip, slander, or pettiness. Maybe we're serving through strong and tender efforts to do justice and to make peace in our larger world, our world that suffers from so much injustice, conflict, hatred, and violence. Maybe we're serving simply by taking time to observe Sabbath, by having faith enough to let go of our harried busyness and to rest in the truth of God.

The fact remains that opportunities for service lie in every moment and around every corner in this city that Jesus is building. With towel and basin in hand and ready to get down on our knees, we join with him to seize those opportunities and to let our light shine. We let it shine in building up Jesus' servant city- the one set on a hill that cannot be hid. Serving and shining in it, we give glory to God. Amen.