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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
12/24/2011, Christmas Eve
Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20
A Jack-and-the-Beanstalk Christmas

In the Name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

¹⁶And [the shepherds] came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. (Luke 2:16, KJV)

I have a title for this Christmas Eve sermon: I call it “A Jack-and-the-Beanstalk Christmas.” The inspiration for this title was a passage I read in Martin Luther, not about Christmas, but about the human tendency to think fancy thoughts about God *apart from* the humble ways God actually chooses to be known by us. Luther says that it is characteristic of the heretics that they rely on their own notions about how God *ought to be* rather than on the way God actually shows himself to be.

Anyway, here is the Luther quote I like. He speaks of “these coverings.” He means the Bible and the story of God’s dealings with us:

But those who want to reach God apart from these coverings exert themselves to ascend to heaven without ladders (that is, without the Word). Overwhelmed by His majesty, which they seek to comprehend without a covering, they fall to their destruction. (LW 1:14)

This passage, I say, puts me in mind of the good old story of Jack and the Beanstalk. You remember how it goes, I bet¹. Thanks to his magic beans, a

¹ Jack is a young lad living with his widowed mother. Their only means of income is a cow. When this cow stops giving milk one morning, Jack is sent to the market to sell it. On the way to the market he meets an old man who offers to give him “magic” beans in exchange for the cow.

Jack takes the beans but when he arrives home with no money, his mother gets angry and throws the beans out the window and sends Jack to bed without supper.

As Jack sleeps, the beans grow into a gigantic beanstalk. Jack climbs the bean stalk and arrives in a land high up in the sky where he follows a road to a house, which is the home of an ogre. He enters the house and asks the ogre’s wife for food. She gives him food, but the ogre returns and senses that a human is nearby:

Fee-fi-fo-fum!
I smell the blood of an Englishman?
Be he ‘live, or be he dead,
I’ll grind his bones to make my bread.

However, Jack is hidden by the ogre’s wife and overhears the ogre counting his money. Jack steals a bag of gold coins as he makes his escape down the beanstalk. Jack repeats his journey up the beanstalk two more times, each time he is helped by the increasingly suspicious wife of the ogre and narrowly escapes with one of the ogre’s treasures. The second time he steals a hen

gigantic beanstalk grows outside Jack's bedroom window. It reaches into the heavens. Young Jack climbs the beanstalk and sees wondrous things, including an ogre, along with his great chant:

Fee-fi-fo-fum!
I smell the blood of an Englishman

Jack has various adventures and in the end, the ogre comes tumbling down that beanstalk.

Luther seems to figure that the heretics are like Jack and the Beanstalk. They climb intellectual ladders all the way to heaven, imagining that they can know God apart from his Word. And when at last they reach heaven, what they find is baby Jesus in the arms of his mother Mary, and they are so astonished, they come tumbling down. "Watch out below!"

So, let's do a similar thing for some other folks. Let's imagine three folks fulfilling their ambitions such that they *see God*, and then let's imagine their astonishment when what they see is the Babe in the manger. Here are the three folks I have in mind: First, Caesar Augustus. Second, the shepherds abiding in the field by night. And third, you and me, here in this great town toward the end of the year of our Lord 2011.

CAESAR AUGUSTUS

Let's begin with Caesar Augustus. This evening's Bible story starts with this line of political history:

¹And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that *all the world* should be taxed. (Luke 2:1, KJV)

Now, that is some authority, to be able to tax "all the world"! Wouldn't it be cool to be able to give orders to all the world? Man, that would be sweet!

And I guess we'd have to say that if *anyone* could give orders to the world back in those days, it would have to be Caesar Augustus². He had been a power player in the Roman Empire going back to the days of his great-uncle Julius Caesar. Following the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BC, Augustus had ruled the empire continually. At first he was part of a triumvirate of rulers, along with Mark Anthony and Marcus Aemilius Lepidus, but by 27 BC he ruled alone. That means that by the time of our Lord's birth, Augustus had been the unchallenged emperor

which laid golden eggs and the third time a magical harp that played by itself. This time he is almost caught by the ogre who follows him down the beanstalk. Jack calls his mother for an axe and chops the beanstalk down, killing the ogre. The end of the story has Jack and his mother living happily ever after with their new riches.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_and_the_Beanstalk

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar_Augustus

for a quarter of a century of the greatest empire the world had known. And he goes on ruling for many years to come. So, Augustus Caesar was a man familiar with power. He was like the centurion in the Gospel story -- the one who was content that Jesus should merely “speak the word” and his servant shall be healed:

⁸The centurion answered and said, Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldest come under my roof: but speak the word only, and my servant shall be healed. ⁹For I am a man under authority, having soldiers under me: and I say to this man, Go, and he goeth; and to another, Come, and he cometh; and to my servant, Do this, and he doeth it. (Matthew 8:8-9, KJV)

Augustus was like this centurion, except that he was writ large. He was the maximum authority in those days.

So, let us imagine Augustus climbing Jack’s beanstalk all the way to heaven. He gathers his royal robes about him, puts his muscles to it, and climbs that beanstalk. As he climbs he thinks to himself, “Great! Now I get to meet a man after my own heart! I am off for an audience with a man accustomed to power. I am on my way to visit the King of kings and the Lord of lords. I bet his palace is going to be splendid! I bet his courtiers are going to be trembling before him. I bet his every whim will be fulfilled, his every self-indulgence completely satisfied.”

But when Augustus gets there, what does he find? A babe in the arms of his mother! A babe, not in a palace, but in a pigsty. A babe whose every whim is directed not toward himself, but toward his people. A babe whose every impulse is toward goodness, with no shadow of evil at all. A babe whose strength consists in self-sacrifice for others. And these things shall so astonish Augustus, that he will go tumbling down that beanstalk. Watch out below!

As for you and me, our area of authority is much less than that of Augustus. We might dream of having more authority. We might even think it would be great to give orders to the whole world. But perhaps we should hesitate some and try to measure ourselves by that Babe of Bethlehem. I wonder whether we would have the wisdom and the goodness for such authority. Well, Christmas is the story of the One whose authority is truly world-wide, even universe-wide, but who has the heart and goodness for the job.

THE SHEPHERDS

Next, let’s have some fun imagining the shepherds climbing Jack’s beanstalk. They can do it. They are used to vigorous activity. You can’t be a shepherd if you can’t train your muscles to carry you many a mile up and down the hills, guiding your sheep along.

So, the shepherds climb the beanstalk. They have been made to understand that they are climbing to see the king! Given popular notions of power and authority, it would be natural for those shepherds to be wondering something as they climb:

they wonder whether they are fit to come into such a royal presence. They expect that they will be entirely intimidated by the king. They fear that they will not be able to speak a word, they will be so tongue-tied. They don't know the etiquette of a palace. Their manners are unpolished. They fear they will make a wreck of things.

But when they get there, what do they find? They find a babe in the arms of his mother. They are resting in a stable. And the shepherds think to themselves, "Alright! I understand this manner of life. I can do this. I can grab a chair, settle down, and talk with this family."

In Martin Luther's *Large Catechism*, he gives a happy interpretation of what he considers the divine command that we should be people of prayer. Often, when we hear that something is "commanded" of us, we sigh or groan, but set our shoulders to the wheel and go ahead and do what is commanded. But Luther thought that the divine command to pray is a light and joyful command. He figures that the command frees us to go ahead and speak what is on our mind, regardless of how worthy we might be:

We allow ourselves to be impeded and deterred by such thoughts as these: "I am not holy enough or worthy enough; if I were as righteous and holy as St. Peter or St. Paul, then I would pray." Away with such thoughts! The very commandment that applied to St. Paul applies also to me. The Second Commandment is given just as much on my account as on his. He can boast of no better or holier commandment than I.
(*Large Catechism*, Kolb and Wengert, Third Part: The Lord's Prayer)

There shepherds are in a similar happy position. They were off to see "a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Royal language indeed. But when they get there, they find a Babe in a stable. This they can handle. This means that the King of kings and Lord of lords is one of *their* kind. He is a king who knows the way of shepherds and of the lowly. And those shepherds *do not* go tumbling down the beanstalk. Rather, St. Luke puts most beautifully the reaction of these shepherds:

²⁰And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them. (Luke 2:20, KJV)

YOU AND ME

Finally, let's consider you and me climbing Jack's beanstalk to see God. First, let me speak to the children in this Christmas Eve congregation. If you have been able to follow me so far, I think you can see that when you reach heaven, you are going to be very pleased by what you find. Christmas means that God himself knows what it is like to be a child. If you could climb Jack's beanstalk all the way to heaven, you would find Mary holding her child, Jesus. This Jesus is indeed the

great and mighty king of all creation. And he is indeed what the angel of the Lord had said to the shepherds: he is the Saviour:

⁹And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹For unto you is born this day in the city of David *a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.* (Luke 2:9-11, KJV)

Jesus is all these majestic and wonderful things: Saviour, Messiah, and Lord. But also, he was a baby, he was a child, he was an adolescent, and he was a young man. The challenges of growing up: he knew them. He knew them inside and out. He knew the pressures and bullies and the joys and the temptations of your life. You have a God who understands your situation. And you have a God who matches his understanding with great love for you.

And finally, a word or two for you grownups. One of the great teachings of the New Testament is that of divine sympathy. We believe in a God who knows us and our daily life, not as a mere intellectual idea, but by personal experience. The Letter to the Hebrews especially emphasizes this teaching:

¹⁵For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. (Hebrews 4:15, RSV)

Again,

¹⁸For because [Jesus] himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted. (Hebrews 2:18, RSV)

Someday, you and I will indeed climb Jack's beanstalk, all the way into the presence of the King. But when we arrive, we will find the Babe of Bethlehem, who grew up as we did, who carried responsibilities as we do, who understands our circumstances, and who is in every sense as we are *except* that he did not mess things up so much by yielding to sin.

Meanwhile, we can serve this good Jesus now. Take that beanstalk I've been talking about, and in your mind make it horizontal. Point it, then, toward your neighbor, especially your neighbor in need. And dash along that beanstalk to God in the form of your neighbor. There are always surprises for us when we encounter our God. More important than palaces and courtiers trembling in their boots is the truth of things: the Babe of Bethlehem and Christ in the form of your neighbor in need.

To this Babe of Bethlehem be the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen.