

Abstract (Chris Altrock (chris.altrock@highlandcc.org; 901.458-3335)

1. File: R:\chris.altrock\preach-worship\messages2007\ChristmasSM\LessonSecretRenewsLong.doc
2. Date: 12/16/07 – Sunday morning – Highland Street Church of Christ
3. Verbal Focus: Christmas is about a God who renews the worst circumstances.
4. Visual Focus: None
5. Function: Inspire listeners to believe God can renew their circumstances/the world's circumstances.
6. Outline:
 - a. Series Introduction: Secrets
 - b. Circumstances can be bad.
 - c. But God can renew them.

PP The Secret Message of Christmas: God Renews the Worst Matt. 2:1-6

Good news:

You gave \$143,049.02 for ministry around world/city (5 times weekly giving!); goal to raise \$170,000 (gave 84%; need last 16%); Give to staff; elder

Best book can read next year is Bible → Refresh initiative: read through Bible in 1 year; only 25 readings per month; read whole book at time; Psalms/Wisdom each day; Gospels interspersed.

1L.1

PP Over the past few years there's been a lot of fascination with secrets, especially spiritual secrets. Several years ago a group calling themselves the Jesus Seminar stirred debate when they announced they had discovered the secret teachings of Jesus. According to the Jesus Seminar, Gospel writers like Luke, Matthew, Mark, and John had supplemented the real teachings of Jesus with their own views and agendas. The Jesus Seminar combed through the Gospels, eliminated what they believed was written under church influence, and left the little they believed to represent the actual teachings of Jesus. More recently, Dan Brown stirred controversy with his book, and the movie made of it, called The DaVinci Code where characters in the book discovered hidden clues. These clues revealed that Jesus was married and had fathered a child and that the church had covered up this truth. Only weeks ago Rhonda Bryne's book The Secret stormed the bookshelves and talk-shows with its claim to reveal the secret to health, wealth, and happiness.

1L.2

While these "secrets" are nothing more than creative thinking, Matthew's Gospel is written with a similar emphasis on the secret or the hidden, especially when it comes to the story of Jesus' birth. In chapters 1-2, Matthew doesn't simply report the story of Jesus' birth. He seeks to uncover long-forgotten details about that story. These details were written in ancient documents which Matthew discloses in his account. In this short series called "The Secret Message of Christmas" we'll explore two of the ancient documents Matthew has uncovered which reveal some little known facts about the birth of Jesus.

2T.1

In Matt. 2, Matthew points to an ancient Hebrew document called Micah to uncover facts about the birth of Jesus: **PP** *1 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 2 and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. 4 When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. 5 "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: 6 " 'But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of*

you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.” (Matt. 2:1-6 TNIV) For Matthew, part of the meaning of the birth of Jesus was wrapped up in this prophecy written by a man named Micah seven hundred years earlier. **PP** It was written in the midst of the worst of circumstances. Micah preached to the people of Jerusalem in the 8th century before Christ. These people were threatened from within their society and from outside their society. Inside, injustice and crime penetrated every segment of the city and of the human heart. Prophets and priests promoted religion and their religious services out of greed. City and national officials were corrupt. Landlords stole from the poor. The judicial system was rife with bribery. In the marketplace, business owners deceived customers. Outside, Jerusalem and the surrounding area were threatened by the armies of Assyria and Syria. It seemed a hopeless combination of circumstances.

2T.2

PP The ancient prophecy was still eerily relevant 700 years later as Matthew wrote, because Jesus was born into some of the worst of circumstances. As Matthew tells us, Jerusalem and the surrounding land are ruled by a man named King Herod, also known as Herod the Great or King of the Jews.¹ But the Jews did not make him king. God did not anoint him king. Instead, the Romans made Herod king over the Jews in 40 B. C. The Romans occupied Israel and Jerusalem and charged Herod to watch over the Jews. Though Herod was responsible for the building of many great works such as the new temple in Jerusalem, he was still a tyrant.² As Matthew records later in Matt. 2:16, threatened by the prospect of Jesus becoming king of the Jews, Herod orders his soldiers to kill all boys two years old and under in Bethlehem and its vicinity.

2T.3

But not only were the people in Jesus’ day ruled by a tyrant, they suffered from a society filled with injustice and inequality. Warren Carter writes that the society into which Jesus was born was one in which wealth was widely regarded as a key indicator of social status.³ The society was divided into two groups: the elite and the non elite. The elite, 5-10% of the population, controlled city life and most wealth.⁴ In other words, it was a society filled with inequality and injustice. Jesus was born into circumstances not too different from those which Micah wrote about.

2L.1

PP At times, like Micah’s readers and infant Jesus, we find ourselves in the worst of circumstances. For some of us, that happens during the holidays. Late last month a Highland member lost his sister and another lost his mother. We have some members observing their first holidays without their husband or wife. At a staff meeting a few weeks ago we read and prayed over the desperate note of a Highland member writing about her husband who passed away during the holidays. For some, the holidays are some of the worst of circumstances.

2L.2

And difficult circumstances are not hard to find at other times of the year. Linda Gregerson writes poetry of some of the difficult times of life. She writes one poem of an abused child.⁵ The child had been physically mistreated by his mother and is now in custody being photographed. She ends her poem with this line: *If anyone were in charge, my vote is to scrap us and start over.*” Sometimes circumstances in life are so bad that the only solution would be to just start over.

3T.1

And that is exactly what Micah promises in this ancient Hebrew prophecy quoted by Matthew. After spending chapters 1-3 describing the terrible circumstances of his listeners, Micah offers

hope in chapters 4-5. The crescendo of his song of hope comes in the words quoted by Matthew: **PP 2** *"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."* **3** *Therefore Israel will be abandoned until the time when she who is in labor gives birth and the rest of his brothers return to join the Israelites.* **4** *He will stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they will live securely, for then his greatness will reach to the ends of the earth.* (Micah 5:2-4 TNIV) God promises that he will not sit idly by while the city suffers moral decay inside and foreign armies outside. He will act. **PP** Micah prophesies of a God who will renew the worst of their circumstances. And God's renewal will begin in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was the home of King David. "Ephrathah" may refer to the clan name Ephrath to which King David's father Jesse belonged.⁶ And from Bethlehem, Micah prophesies, God will begin his renewal. This renewal will come about through a representative of God's. God will send a helper, a ruler whose origins are from of old, probably referring to the days of King David.⁷ This ruler will be like a shepherd, pasturing the scared and wounded sheep of Israel. He will be stronger than any threat endangering the sheep. He will have the strength of the LORD. And his help and pastoral care will not be limited only to one people or one place. His greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. Micah's prophecy is a promise that God can renew the worst. Circumstances in Jerusalem could hardly be worse. But Micah promises that God will bring renewal. Through this ruler from Bethlehem who will have divine strength and a shepherd's heart, the circumstances will be reversed.

3T.2

And Matthew believes that this ancient text is secretly speaking about Jesus' birth. Matthew believes Jesus' birth is the ultimate fulfillment of this ancient promise. Baby Jesus is this ruler from Bethlehem. Baby Jesus is this one with divine strength and a shepherd's heart. Baby Jesus is the one whose greatness will reach to the ends of the earth. **PP** Baby Jesus is the one through whom God will renew the worst. It's no coincidence that just a few verses later, in Matt. 2:19, Herod dies. Jesus is born and Herod dies. Already, God is renewing the worst. He's removing from power the one who was making the lives of Jesus' contemporaries miserable. And through Baby Jesus a movement would be launched and a community formed where there was no more inequality or injustice. Just two chapters later we find this description of the now grown Jesus: **23** *Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.* **24** *News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them.* **25** *Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him.* (Matt. 4:23-25 TNIV). Through this Jesus born in Bethlehem, God renews the worst of circumstances—he gives insight to the confused, healing to the sick, freedom to the possessed, and peace to the paralyzed. He renews the worst of circumstances.

3L.1

And that is still the message of Christmas. It's one of those messages which get lost and forgotten in the glitz of the holiday. But Matthew seeks to reveal this ancient message for us. The birth of Jesus is about many things. But one of those is this: God renews the worst. The birth of Jesus is our introduction to a God who is active upon the earth renewing the worst of circumstances.

3L.2

In May I was with a friend of mine at a conference. In the past several years he's experienced some of the worst times of his life. His father, a highly respected person known by people across the nation in his line of work, was fired for sexual harassment. My friend's brother went through a difficult divorce. He lost his job after making significant but honest mistakes and questions were raised about his effectiveness. Finally, a church he was working for closed its doors; it simply ceased to exist. But when I saw my friend in May, it was as if he was living a different life. He had recently been hired by a California church which is one of the most active, servant-oriented, and fastest growing in that area. He's doing exactly what he loves at that church and is impacting the lives of hundreds. He's made strong friendships and has found a new home. God renews the worst of circumstances.

3L.3

As a church we've experienced this over the past two years. In some regards, these have been the two most difficult years in recent history for Highland. The relocation has been delayed again and again. We've lost over 200 of our friends who decided not to relocate and instead are attending other churches. One of our worship leaders, Ryan Porche, left to plant a new church in Texas. And we've had to make extraordinarily difficult financial decisions. It's been a hard two years. But in the midst of those circumstances, we've watched God renew. A new men's ministry has been launched which is drawing 70-80 men to its initial Sunday 7 AM meetings. Four hundred people gathered on a Sunday night recently at the new church property on Houston Levee. The Highland Youth Group had a remarkable summer of ministry from Work Camp to TIME trips to Summer Camp. They have their first evangelist, a staff member devoted solely to outreach to teens. We recently sent a team of Highland members to Ukraine. We continue to be one of the most significant sources of funds and volunteers for ministries to the poor like MUM, Agape, and FIT. We provided complete Thanksgiving meals to almost 200 families this year and toys to hundreds of children. We are living Matthew's Christmas message. God renews the worst of circumstances.

3L.4

During Thanksgiving Kendra's aunt told me of a new member at her church. The new member wanted to get involved with the church. So, when a church bake sale was advertised to help raise funds for an important cause, the new member decided to participate. On the day of the sale, she carefully prepared and baked a nice cake. But at the last moment, the cake fell in the oven and was ruined. There wasn't time to bake another cake before the sale began. So, the woman acted on an impulse. She took several rolls of toilet paper, arranged them on a plate, and then frosted them. It looked like a beautiful chocolate cake. She rushed the cake to the church bake sale. On the way, she called her daughter. She explained to her daughter what had happened and she told her daughter, "I want you to come to the bake sale right now and buy this cake before anyone else does." She figured that way the church would still get money for the cake and no one would know about the toilet paper inside the cake. Her daughter could just throw it away. The woman dropped the cake off and drove back home. Unfortunately, the daughter was delayed. By the time she got to the bake sale, her mother's chocolate cake was gone. Someone else had bought it. The daughter and the woman were horrified. Things couldn't be any worse. Then, they got worse. Awhile later, the woman was invited to the home of a prominent woman in the church. The lady was hosting a shower. And when the woman arrived, she saw lots of nice finger foods and desserts laid out. And there, right there in the home of this prominent church member, was her toilet paper chocolate cake. It hadn't been cut yet. The woman didn't know what to do. Should she tell the hostess? Should she bolt and run and relocate to Brazil? She decided to tell

the hostess. As she approached, she overheard the hostess and another guest talking. The guest, seeing the beautiful chocolate cake, said to the hostess, "That is such a lovely cake. It must have taken you a long time to make it. You are very talented." And the hostess said, "Thank you very much." She took credit for the whole thing. She let the guest believe that she had baked that cake. And do you know what the woman did, the woman who baked that cake? She closed her mouth and didn't say a word to the hostess. God can renew the worst of circumstances.

3L.5

For Matthew, that's the message of Christmas. The birth of Jesus is about God sending not just help, but a personal representative to bring renewal into the world. God renews the worst. It's what God has been doing ever since Adam and Eve took a monumental misstep in the garden of Eden. He's been working to mend what was torn, to renew what was tarnished. It's what God will fully and finally do at the return of Jesus when, according to Revelation, there will be a new heaven and a new earth. And that night at Bethlehem God planted a flag, God drew a line in the sand, God said, "That renewal takes a new step tonight. That renewal reaches another level tonight. Tonight, renewal goes into high gear." And Jesus was born. God renews the worst.

Elders available.

Power Point

1. The Secret Message of Christmas: God Renews the Worst.
2. We love a secret
3. Text of Matt. 2:1-6 in TNIV
4. Micah prophesied under the worst of circumstances
5. Jesus was born in the worst of circumstances
6. At times, we find ourselves in the worst of circumstances.
7. Text of Micah 5:2-5 in TNIV
8. Micah prophesied of a God who renews the worst.
9. Jesus is the means by which God renews the worst.

For the Link

Notes:

1. For Matthew, one of those “forgotten” or “secret” messages regarding the birth of Jesus is found in the Old Testament book of _____.
2. Micah prophesied under this, Jesus was born into this, and we often find ourselves in the midst of this: the _____ of circumstances.
3. Micah prophesied about this and Jesus represented this: A God who _____ the worst.
4. In what ways has God brought renewal into the circumstances of your life?

¹ Raymond Brown The Birth of the Messiah (Random House, 1993), 170.

² Leon Morris, The Gospel According to Matthew (Eerdmans, 1992), 35.

³ Warren Carter Matthew and the Margins (Orbis Books, 2005), 172.

⁴ Warren Carter Matthew and the Margins (Orbis Books, 2005), 18.

⁵ Quoted in Thomas W. Currie, "Jesus, Thou Joy of Loving Hearts," Journal for Preachers, 24-25, Lent 2006 (Volume XXIX, Number 2)

⁶ Harold Shank Minor Prophets, Vol. 1 Hosea – Micah College Press NIV Commentary (College Press, 2006), 420.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 421.