ON BEYOND ZEBRA

This morning I want to begin by reading from one of the great minds in theology, Theodore S. Geisel. You might know him better as Dr. Seuss. Listen carefully, for what I am about to read ties in very nicely with all that I want to say.

On Beyond Zebra.
Said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell, my very young friend who was learning to spell: "The A is for Ape, the B is for Bear, the C is for Camel, the H is for Hair. The M is for Mouse, the R is for Rat…I know all 26 letters just like that. Through to Z is for Zebra, I know them all well," said Conrad Cornelius O'Donnell O'Dell. "Now I know everything anyone knows from beginning to end, from the start to the close, because Z is as far as the alphabet goes."

Then he almost fell flat on his face on the floor, when I picked up the chalk and drew one letter more. A letter he had never dreamed of before. And I said, "You can stop if you want with the Z, and most people stop with the Z, but not me. In the places I go, there are things that I see that I never could spell if I stopped with a Z. I am telling you this because you are one of my friends, my alphabet starts where your alphabet ends. My alphabet starts with this letter called yezz, it is the letter I use to spell yezzametezz. You will be sort of surprised what there is to be found, once you go beyond Z and start poking around. So on beyond zebra, it is high time you were shown, that you really do not know all there is to be known."

Now, why did I read that to you? Well, on that first Christmas morning, God went "on beyond zebra." On that first Christmas morning with Jesus in a manger, God added a new letter to the alphabet, as it were, with the Virgin Birth – and we need that "letter" in order to spell Incarnation. Incarnation simply means "God made flesh" – God dwelling among us as one of us. Absolutely amazing.

Jesus, whose birth we celebrate at Christmas, is the most unique individual in the entire universe. He is one of a kind. No one else is, has been, or ever will be both God and human at the same time. No one. And while it may be difficult for us to wrap our minds around this incredible fact, it is true. Just like the two sides of a coin are different and yet they remain part of the same coin, so also Jesus is the God-man. Co-equal with God, co-eternal with God, all powerful like God, all knowing like God, yet Jesus voluntarily set aside His divinity to clothe Himself with humanity by being born as a baby, in a manger, some 2,000 years ago.

And why did He do that? 1 John 4:14b, "The Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world." God knew that our world was in a terrible state. God knew that in our sinful, rebellious, disobedience we had turned our backs on Him and rejected Him and we needed saving – we needed to be rescued from ourselves and from our sin, and our relationship with God needed to be restored, so the Father sent His Son to be the Savior of the world. What a loving, gracious, merciful God He is!
John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

John 3:16 is certainly one of the most well-known verses in the entire Bible. Martin Luther called it the heart of the Bible – the Gospel in miniature. If all of the Bibles in all of the world were destroyed and only John 3:16 somehow survived, anyone, anywhere could be saved and enter into a personal relationship with God by reading and following this verse. Recite John 3:16. John 1:12 adds some more clarity with regards to what happens when a person chooses to "believe" in Jesus. John 1:12 says, "Yet to all who received Him, to those who believed in His name, He gave the right to become children of God."

Wow! And, when we do choose to believe in Jesus and receive Him, by faith, into our lives as Savior, so many, many things happen. John 3:16 says we now have eternal life. John 1:12 says we become children of God. 1 John 1:9 tells us that "if we confess our sins, He is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." 2 Corinthians 5:17 declares that if anyone is in Christ, they are a new creation; the old has gone and the new has come. In John 14, Jesus said that He was going to heaven to prepare a place for us, and that He would come back one day to take

us to be with Him forever. And there are many, many other benefits of becoming a Christian that I could list and expound upon.

But, for our purposes this morning, I want to focus for a few moments on just two of those benefits. The benefit of being at peace with God, and the benefit of being able to enjoy the peace of God.

Today is the first Sunday of Advent, that time of the year when we deliberately and intentionally prepare for and build up to the celebration of Christmas. I will leave it to Pastor Steve to explain and perhaps go into more detail about the significance of Advent, and the use of Advent candles and Advent wreaths and so on, but suffice it to say that historically and traditionally the four themes that are most often emphasized during the four Sundays of Advent are the themes of peace, hope, joy and love, and Pastor Steve asked me to specifically address the theme of peace, which I am happy to do.

First, let me talk briefly about the possibility of being at <u>peace with God</u>. Romans 5:1 states it very succinctly and clearly: "Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ."

If we follow the teachings of John 3:16 and John 1:12 and believe in and receive Jesus, by faith, into our lives as Savior, Romans 5:1 declares that we are now at peace with God. But, if we do not believe in and receive Jesus, the Bible also tells us very plainly that we are at war with God. James 4:4-5, "Don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred toward God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." I personally cannot understand why anyone would want to become an enemy of God, or to be at war with God. For the fact of the matter is that in war there are always winners and losers, and my friends if you are at war with God I can guarantee with absolute certainty that you will not win. Romans 3:23, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." And why is that important to know? Because Romans 6:23 warns that "the wages of sin is death." The wages of sin, what we deserve for our sin, our rebellion, our disobedience, is to be separated, eternally separated from God and to be eternally punished and tormented because of our sin in hell.

But none of that is necessary, if only we would believe in and receive Jesus into our lives as Savior, and then, as it says in Romans 5:1, having been justified through faith we can be at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. And then, when we are at peace with God, it is also possible for us to experience the <u>peace of God.</u> Philippians 4:6-7, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, but prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Does anyone here know how to worry? Can I see a show of hands? Does anyone here know how to worry? Just as I suspected – all of us know how to worry. Well, here is some good news for you: if you know how to worry, you know how to pray – just take your worry list and turn it into a prayer list, and trust God for the results. Isaiah 26:3, "You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in You."

In closing, let me ask, are you at peace with God? If not, may I urge you to believe in and receive Jesus Christ as your Savior today? You will be so glad you did – it really will be your best Christmas ever. Or, if you have already decided to be a follower of Jesus, is there someone in your life, in your sphere of influence, at home, at work, at school, in your neighborhood, that needs to hear the good news that the Father has sent His Son to be the Savior of the world? Sharing that great news with them could turn out to be the best Christmas gift they have ever received. And, are you actively experiencing the peace of God, in the midst of all of the trouble and turmoil that surrounds us? 1 Peter 5:7, "Cast all of your anxiety on Him, because He cares for you."

I found it interesting to learn that the word "peace" can be found in twenty-six of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. You see, the Bible is a book about peace. It opens with peace in the Garden of Eden, it ends with peace in Eternity, and it explains how we can be at peace with God and how we can experience the peace of God. Jesus said in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in Me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." Let's pray.