

December 29, 2013

Isaiah 52:8-10 (call to Worship)

Luke 2:1-20, Luke 2:21-40

"After-Christmas Recap"

How quickly, how quickly, the Christmas thrill is o'er.... All the weeks of preparation, and now there is the clean-up and the putting away, finding places for the new gifts... After-Christmas sales rage. Too quickly it is over. So today we do a re-cap. We try to figure out - in our hearts - what happened, what we received, where we go from here.

We have sung the hymn that proclaims that in Bethlehem, our hopes and fears have been met. Have they? There seems to be a lot of violence and suffering, in spite of our Christmas celebration. So we do well to look more carefully at the Christmas Gift God has given us.

The second reading from Luke this morning told of two persons, both elderly, who had waited for years and years to see God's work of salvation. Simeon had been promised that he would not die before he saw God's anointed one; Anna had spent probably sixty years living at the temple, trying to have a meaningful life through service to God after being devastated by early widowhood. The eight-day old Jesus was brought to the temple for the customary dedication by his peasant parents, and in him both Simeon and Anna recognized their own salvation and the salvation of the world. They received this gift and proclaimed it, and their proclamation continues to ring out for us today. "O Lord, lettest now thy servant depart in peace, for I have seen thy salvation..."

So tell me, this Sunday after Christmas, have *we* seen our salvation, have we recognized God at work in our lives or in this world, or has it been just another holiday to endure?

The story of Christmas invites wonder, it prods the imagination to awaken, it challenges us to see the extraordinary image offered us: God entering human flesh! A peasant couple, some not-so-impressive shepherds, a couple of old folks in a temple... This the setting for the birth of the child of the Creator of all history... Some call the Bethlehem story totally ridiculous, too incredible to believe. It is a story where wonder fills the ordinary. The ORDINARY...

Long ago I read that in Zica, Serbia, there is a monastery that has a church with seven doors. Seven doors are there because seven Serbian kings were crowned in that church. It was thought unseemly for the new king to enter the church by the same door another king had used. So each time there was a coronation, it is said that a new door was made so that the new king could enter by a door no one else had ever used. So different from Jesus, the King of Kings! When Jesus came into the world, he needed no new kind of door: he entered just as every human being has entered into life on this earth, through the womb of a woman. The ordinary, common door became the door for our salvation. Our Creator entered into the very fabric of our ordinary lives; our God is right with us, transforming our ordinary minutes and decisions into gifts of grace and hope and peace. That's what Christmas proclaims and what Jesus offers.

Receiving God's gift of Christmas is not so easy, though, for we adults have spent many of our years learning to limit our own expectations and our ability to receive... This week has been sort of interesting as lots of folks (1400 so far, as of last night) at the Starbucks in Newington (since it started on Christmas Eve) have learned the power of unexpected giving, as they have participated in the days-long "pay it forward" event there at the drive-through window! This is a neat thing to see; perhaps we are learning to hear our Savior's challenge to us to care for others. In spite of this event, though, it is a fact that many

people come off the Christmas season feeling a huge let-down and little sense of an infusion of assurance that God is really with them. It can be very hard to receive Christmas as a gift from God.

Several years ago clergy colleague of mine broke his shoulder. He wrote that it was one of the toughest things he'd endured, because he had to ask members of his church for help with tasks that had once been so commonplace for him. Since he was single, he needed outside help just to get dressed; he had broken his dominant shoulder, so he needed help with writing and tying his shoes... He could not open a jar, he could not drive his stick-shift car.... He found himself utterly challenged by his dependency, and utterly surprised by how willing the folks of his church were to help him, once he swallowed his pride and asked for help...

The Bible is the story of God offering human beings gifts: the gift of life, the gift of choice, the gift of covenant, and finally, the total gift of love and forgiveness contained in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. God offers us salvation and hope. But we must recognize it, realize our need for it, and then we must say YES to it and let it make a difference in our lives.

Throughout the Bible there were folks who could or would not receive the gift of Jesus: the religious authorities of Jesus' day saw him only as a threat; those who yelled for him to be crucified did not understand what he offered them; next week we'll see how King Herod saw him as competition that needed to be eliminated.... But there were many who DID receive God's gift of salvation through Jesus: Mary and Joseph, the shepherds, the foreign star-gazers (kings or magi); the Roman centurion, the Syrophenecian woman, the thief on the Cross next to Jesus, and even Saul/Paul....

So here we are. How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given... But lots of folks are being cut off from federal unemployment benefits as of NOW. And groups throughout the world are at war against each other. Innocent and vulnerable children suffer from hunger, divorce, and abuse. Where is God's Gift? Where is salvation? Where is peace? What about hope? We've seen UPS stumble; was God also unable to deliver this year? (pause) In the face of these questions, I hear God's Word: "My ways are not your ways." Just because we have trouble seeing God at work does NOT mean that God's purposes are not coming to fruition!

A gift has been offered us at Christmas, the invitation to be drawn into a wondrous story, a story focused on God's work in the midst of common, ordinary people. This Gift would tell us that God is with us right now, loving us, helping us, healing us, asking us to dare to love others, letting us know that the best way to find life is to let go of our grip on it enough to reach out to someone else...

A man, Fred, sat in his house, alone in a dark room. He watched people rush by, some on the sidewalk, some in cars. It was Christmas Eve, his first since his wife of forty-five years had died. This year he had no tree, no Christmas decorations, no special lights. Since he and his wife had never had children, he'd bought no presents this year. He felt a mixture of sadness and numbness as he watched families go by. Nothing for him to do, tonight or tomorrow. Maybe ever. He had retired this year, right before Marie had gotten sick. He had enough money, but everything else felt empty. His phone rang. A man he had met when he worked at the polling place for the last election was on the line, asking if he could possibly help out at the soup kitchen on Christmas Day. "I know this may be a tough Christmas for you, Fred, so I wonder if you have some time to help us out?" Surprised, Fred could not come up with a reason not to be available, so he agreed to meet the other man downtown at 10 a.m. Looking back later, Fred spoke

about his Christmas Day experience. “I had an amazing day! People were hungry and I could help them! We peeled potatoes and set the tables and made coffee and it reminded me of my Army days, following the orders of Gertrude, who runs the place. When the guests arrived, there were so many children! A church group came and sang and a Jewish synagogue brought in lots of gifts for everybody, and it was quite amazing. People seemed to really appreciate everything. Maybe the best part was when everybody took a moment to be quiet, and somebody sang a solo and somebody else offered a prayer, and all of a sudden I felt good, peaceful, inside and out. It felt as though God was telling me, ‘This is important, this is what life is about, this is why the Baby Jesus was born in the first place! Love the Lord your God as best you can, and love your neighbor as much as you do yourself, and your Christmases and your life will never be empty again.’ So now I’m a regular at the Soup kitchen, and I’ve started helping people with their finances one day a week, too. I’ve been given a new life.” How silently and unexpectedly that wondrous gift is given.

God's gift is hope that emerges in the face of hopelessness, it is joy that surprises the weary heart, it is love that is made new whenever we see God in the face of another and recognize God's presence in our own hearts. It's when we realize Emmanuel, that God really is with us.

Right now, right this moment, each of us is offered a gift: the Bethlehem babe was born for you; salvation is yours. Whatever you are missing, however you are hungry or empty you may find yourself, God can fill you. Wherever you are floundering and afraid in life, God will lead you forward. This salvation is for life, it is available for all, and it is a forever Gift.

May God's presence be your hope and your peace, today and every ordinary and extraordinary day, as you say YES to being part of God's work in this world; through Jesus Christ, Amen.