

Tell the Good News

Romans 1:1-7; Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

CWZepp, BWCOB, December 22, 2013

I don't preach Christmas sermons. Really.

Preaching during the holiday season isn't typical territory for an Associate Pastor.

I was thinking about this as I was preparing for today – wondering about what should be my focus, which of the lectionary scriptures should be emphasized, and the like – and it was bugging me enough that I took the time to go back through my sermon archive to see how many times I have even spoken from the pulpit during Advent. The tally:

In 12 years of pastoral ministry, I have only preached 8 times during Advent. Five of those were on the first Sundays of Advent, which often is also the Sunday after Thanksgiving, blurring at least the socio-cultural if not the theological emphasis. As for the other 3 Advent Sundays, I have spoken on each of them a grand total of once, the most recent being in 2006 – my final year at the Mountville Church of the Brethren. Not once have I spoken on a Sunday other than the first during Advent since I have been at Bridgewater.

Now before I sound like I am complaining, let me assure you that I am quite content with this reality. For a host of reasons that span from family dynamics to theological stumbling blocks, I am not at all sad to generally lay low during the “high holy” seasons of the church. I am cut from a liturgical cloth that fits much more comfortably during “ordinary time” than holiday time.

So perhaps it should come as no surprise that I have struggled in finding my voice for this preaching assignment. While Christmas and Easter are the bread and butter for most preachers, they are unfamiliar homiletical territory for me. And so I have been wrestling with this sermon, trying to discern what is the good word that I have to bring to you this morning, despite the obvious.

As with many you, this past week has been filled with holiday preparations – planning trips to see family, making, buying, and wrapping gifts, reading and writing greeting cards, baking, cleaning, etc. I confess that such things exact a toll on my holiday spirit, even when I am not recovering from illness as I have been this week. A welcome reprieve from it all came on Thursday, when I journeyed to Buena Vista to spend a few hours with the small group of pastors with whom I began meeting about six years ago as part of the Vital Pastors program sponsored by the Brethren Academy. Since completing our intentional study program a few years ago, we do not get together but for a few times a year. But I look forward to the little time I do get to be with these friends.

On Thursday, we met for lunch at a little art café. As we typically do, we did reflect a little about our respective ministries and how the ideas and lessons we learned during our time together in the program have continued to provide us with insight and growth. But for the most part we just spent time together. We shared about our lives and our families and our work. We shared about our joys and our struggles. We shared good food and artisan coffee and lots of laughter. We even shared a mutual “Good Samaritan” moment, when we witnessed a man trying to get his car started through the café window, and all five of us ended up along the side

of the street outside first pushing the car in an ill-fated attempt to pop-start it, and then in an ill-fated attempt to figure out how to attach jumper cables to a Prius. Fortunately, my trusty red Camry was also parked about a block away, and having had several recent refresher courses on the receiving end of jumper cables, we did eventually succeed in getting the man's engine started. We also succeeded in establishing a new line of humor about how many preachers it takes to start a car.

I share all of this because during the four hours that I was with those guys on Thursday, and just about only those four hours, I was not thinking about Christmas this week. And yet those four hours were more life-giving and spirit enriching than almost anything I have done during Advent. I say "almost" because an exception for me this season has been our family "Advent Time" during which we open the daily window on our Advent calendar, read the scripture, and sing a Christmas carol together. As many of you got a taste of last week, it is hard to not have my heart warmed in reading the daily verses these days with my kids leading the way.

I have been sitting for the past few days with the vague notion that the word I had to share with you today was to be found in the intersection of these two experiences from my own Advent reality this year. The big stumbling block for me has been that I hadn't the foggiest idea how they were related. On one hand, the Vital Pastors gathering was decided un-Christmassy, which was in no small part the reason it was such a breath of fresh air. On the other hand, opening Advent calendar windows with the family doesn't get much more deeply embedded in holiday observance. So where is the connection?

As I was contemplating this question, two quotes came to my mind. The first was from Carl Braaten in his book *Stewards of the Mysteries*. He wrote:

Jesus gave us a new and paradoxical definition of God, a definition of the humility of God. Many people were offended. They wanted a God of glory, not entering the world at the bottom, not from a despised place like Nazareth in Galilee, but he must come in from the top. He must be properly introduced, by the right people, and with the appropriate protocol. But instead the people got the man from Nazareth, and he was only prepared to give them a message of the humility of God, of the identification of God with the people and things that don't count for very much in this world. He carried his message of God to the extreme, driving the humility of God all the way to the cross.

The second quote was from a rock song released by Joan Osbourne in the mid '90s called "One of Us." It was a controversial song, but its chorus has always struck a chord with me. It begins:

*What if God was one of us?
Just a slob like one of us?
Just a stranger on the bus
Trying to make his way home?"*

And that's when I thought of the man who's car wouldn't start alongside the side of the road in Buena Vista – a stranger, trying to make his way home. In the midst of the laughter and the good-natured attempts to help someone in need, it really was a God moment for me.

And as I've continued reflecting on it, I realize that in a very deep sense, it was also a Christmas moment. Because at its core, the good news of Christmas is the Incarnation – God becoming "one of us." The incarnation tells us that God became human in every way, took on

the limits of a body and a human mind and heart, even going through the particularities of human birth, death, and family life. Too often, with our sentimentalized and acculturated celebrations of Christmas and our nostalgic singing of the Christmas hymns of faith, we forget what a strange, peculiar, and yes, even scandalous thing it is for us to point to an incarnate God – a God who could take on even the form of an infant. Immanuel – the God with us – has come not as a great warrior king, not as an all-powerful Messiah of salvific judgment and wrath, but as one of us...born as a baby just like the rest of us.

During the Christmas season, we celebrate a birth narrative of Jesus that it is at the very least spectacular – full of angels and dreams, of prophecies fulfilled and pronouncements from on high. It is a wonder-full and beautiful story. And if it is to be believed, one might question the thoughts of Braaten that I shared, for this divine infant certainly seems to have entered the world with glory, having come from about as high up as one can imagine, and having been introduced to the world by angels voices and astronomical wonders that set the protocol for a whole new realm of pageantry.

But for me and my family, that story has literally been brought to life this year around a small set of Advent candles, a Bible, and a calendar that marks the passing days until Christmas with verses of scripture connecting us to the larger story of God's relationship with us. For a few minutes (almost) every day, the Christmas story intersects our daily living. And in those moments, while we re-tell the good news of the birth of Jesus so many years ago, I am poignantly reminded of the good news that Christ is still being born in us today.

One of the remarkable gifts of incarnate faith is that we worship a God who does not stand apart from the world, refusing to be involved. We do not experience God as being aloof, unnamed, or unknowable. We experience God as being with us – even one of us – a human being that lived and laughed, loved and learned, felt grief and pain, was born and died. We confess that in a first century Palestinian baby named Jesus, God was one of us.

But we confess not only an incarnation in a single baby thousands of years ago, but also an incarnation that continues in the lives of those who claim that baby's name. For God came not only in Jesus, but continues to come, made visible in lives of faith that carry his name. We are those who not only believe that God was working in Christ Jesus to reconcile the world "back then", but those who are also called to embody the continuance of "Immanuel" today. We are those who are to be salt to the earth and light to the world – demonstrating "God with us" in the way we live and love.

And so, during Advent, we tell this good news as we gather here for worship each Sunday, and as we gather around candles with our families at home. But we also tell the good news every time we sit down to the table with friends, every time we tuck our children into bed at night, every time we help a stranger in need. We tell the good news every time we smile at a cashier in the check-out line, every time we leave a generous tip for the person waiting on us in a restaurant, every time we show kindness to our neighbor. We tell the good news not just during the holiday season, but throughout the year, and throughout our lives.

For the truly good news – the news hinted at by the prophet Isaiah long ago in the scripture we read for our Advent Candle lighting this morning and the news proclaimed in the Christmas birth narratives such as we will hear shortly in our sending scripture – is ultimately the same good news that Paul says he was called to proclaim in the not-very-Christmassy opening lines of Romans which preceded the sermon. It is good news of both the glory and the humility of

God; of both the spectacular, unqualified uniqueness of Jesus about whom prophets spoke and angels sang, and also “the identification of God with the people and things that don’t count for very much in this world;” of both the mystery of the transcendent God and the presence of the immanent Christ; of both the extraordinary and the ordinary.

All that said, I’m not sure whether or not I have preached a Christmas sermon or not. But that is the good news I have to share with you this morning. May it be so for you, and may it empower you to tell the good news in your own lives in your own ways this holiday season and beyond. For the one who is Immanuel has promised us, “Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” And that, is Good News indeed!

Prayers of the People¹

Lord Jesus,
Master of both the light and the darkness,

Send your Holy Spirit
upon our preparation for Christmas.

We who have so much to do
seek quiet spaces to hear your voice each day.

We who are anxious over many things
look forward to your coming among us.

We who are blessed in so many ways
long for the complete joy of your Kingdom.

We whose hearts are heavy
seek the joy of your presence.

We are your people,
walking in darkness
yet seeking the light.

To you we say “Come, Lord Jesus.”

¹ Henri Nouwen. Shared in a *Faith Forward* e-mail Christmas Greeting from Dave Csinos, December 19, 2013.