

Text: Isaiah 52:7-10; Luke 2:1-20

Title: Good News Everywhere!

Date: Dec 25, 2011

Merry Christmas! One of my favorite professors in Seminary was a retired Congregational minister by the name of Brown Barr- he told the story that one year the congregation decided to do a midnight candlelit Christmas Eve service, not quite noticing that they had a 8am Christmas Day : Bright and early on Christmas morning Brown looked over the pulpit as saw the same dozen pairs of eyes he saw just a few hours before- bleary. So after the first hymn he suggested that they “just call it a day “ At his retirement dinner they said it was the best sermon he ever gave! So while it is too late to call it a day- I promise that I won't be long winded.

Every 6-7 years Christmas falls on a Sunday and we are often landed with mixed feelings. On one hand we want to be home doing the family Christmas celebration (for some it started at 0 dark 30 when the kids came bounding in with news that Santa has come. On the other hand, the whole notion of closing the church on Sunday- Christmas Sunday at that- just doesn't make any sense.

Ah, but that is what happens when we focus on ourselves, doesn't it? I mean so often we focus on us- our response: how we accept the gospel promises; how the Holy Spirit gives us the faith to respond to Christ's offer of redemption and recreation; or how we respond in grateful obedience, passing on to others the blessings that God has showered upon us. The focus on *me, me, me* leads me to focus on presents yet unopened under the tree. I know it sounds so terribly selfish when I put it that way- but isn't that how it feels?

But Christmas is so much more than presents- as everyone from the Little Drummer boy, the Grinch and Ebenezer Scrooge reminds us. Christmas isn't about us or the choices that WE make. Christmas is about the choice God made. To come in person, to open the gates of the kingdom wide and to have the password be: GRACE.

To the average person in the Roman Empire the news that God decided to have a son would not have seemed anything new or novel- it seems that Zeus and the other gods on Olympus were having children all of the time. To the Jews, the news that the Messiah had come also would not have seemed all the surprising- for it seemed every

few years another “messiah” would rise up and declare that God has appointed him to overthrow the Romans. So what else is new?

What was new is the news that God became one of us- Emmanuel. If you think about, it would have far easier to simply mass forgive the human race for all their sins. Poof- you are all forgiven! That would make sense if all God wanted for us was to live up to some arbitrary standards of ritual purity. If I do the right things the right way then I am righteous. But still the focus remains on me. No, what God chose to do was infinitely riskier: for in becoming human He is able to show us His true nature in terms that we can understand. Righteousness is not about ritual or ethical purity- righteousness is about relationship with God defined by God’s grace and opening ourselves up to being radically transformed by the Holy Spirit. This *is God’s doing*, not ours. This is *God’s choice*- not ours. By choosing to come as a baby- completely vulnerable and powerless- God upsets all of our conventional notions of how a god should act. Where is the pomp? Where in the thundering voice out of the heavens? God *chooses* to lay all that aside- loud noise and endless ritual do not open doors to relationship, they close them. By coming as the most common, God removed all the obstacles that we erect; God gets rid of all our objections- for who can object to a baby?

God does not stay a powerless baby of course,- but what Jesus says and does are the subjects for another day. For today it is enough to say that the One Isaiah spoke of has come- announcing peace, good news and salvation. Jesus’ coming changes the whole game plan- for God reigns, not from some distant mountain or from beyond the heavens- but from right here- in our hearts. We get to be the ones who bring good news!

That good news was first declared to shepherds, again the most ordinary of men. That too shatters our preconceived ideas- for since when does God choose to use ordinary people? we tend to think that you have to be special, you have to be blessed, you have to be that other guy. I’ve got news for you, we are that other guy! The Christmas story is filled with the most ordinary of people ; with the exception of King Herod- but every story has to have a bad guy; and the Kings from the East- but Jesus came for them too. Which is why they are in the story in the first place.

If the Shepherds are the first ones told the good news- look at what they do with it. They find Mary, Joseph and the Child, then they go back to work, praising God on the way back. For this too is God's choice- choosing relationship with ordinary people and elevating the everyday ordinary jobs to His level. There is no job, no function, no profession beneath the One Who Came In Person. In choosing to transform us, God chooses to transform what we do as well. There is no job that is beneath him- which is probably why he hung out with fishermen and other low lifes.

No, this morning it is enough to notice what God has done and give thanks together. For God came as one of us, offering new life based on His grace, declaring that even the most ordinary is transformed by His touch.

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Isaiah 9:6-7:*

Amen