

Sunday, November 15, 2015, the Thirty-Third Sunday in Ordinary Time

Call to Worship (see bulletin)

Prayer of the Day

Lord, we love you and praise you. Thank you for welcoming us here, and welcoming us into your kingdom as if we deserved it. Remind us today of your unending grace. Extend the joy of your promises through us to world. Help us always to be in a state of thanks, praise and hope. Through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Call to Confession

Jesus was born into this world so we would know just how much God loves us. He became like us, so we could face him, eye to eye. I invite you now to face God in prayer as we reflect on our shortcomings and sin, both together and in silence. Let us pray.

Prayer of Confession (see bulletin)

Assurance of Pardon

People of God, hear the good news: In the name of Jesus Christ, we are forgiven.

Thanks be to God.

Christ is our peace. The peace of Christ be with you all. **And also with you.**

CANTICLE 1 SAMUEL 2:1-10 (see bulletin)

TIME OUT FOR TEACHING: Bible Genres – Birth Stories

You have just been reading with me a responsive version of one of the many stories in Scripture of an unlikely, long hoped for birth. Hannah, the mother of Samuel. She married to Elkanah, a very good man, but after some time she grew more and more depressed that she still hadn't become pregnant. She was getting sad that others in the family were deriding her, taunting her for the problem. And then, after she lies on the floor of the Temple, praying silently to God, she finds that God has allowed her to finally be with child. And he isn't just any child. He becomes the great prophet Samuel. He is so cherished, she dedicates Samuel to the Lord's work, as her "first fruit." And God uses Samuel, eventually he becomes a prophet to King David.

If there is anything we can ever take away from these miraculous stories of conception and birth, it could be to show us that God can turn a desert into a spring. Something that looks so barren to us, God can bring life. We see this time and again, with Abram and Sarai, Ruth and Boaz, and more. Even Jesus was born to a woman not yet prepared to conceive. The theologian Karl Barth once said of the birth of Jesus that the virgin birth has nothing to do with gynecology. It has

everything to do with God taking initiative on behalf of our salvation. It was done without a human's intervention.

Why did God choose certain places for such work, and not seemingly everywhere? That's a good question. I challenge you to think about it.

Prayer for Illumination

Teach us, O God, by your Word and Spirit. Help us to hear, know, and live the gospel, so that we might proclaim in word and deed the good news that you offer us this day— a message of peace to the whole community, and love with faith through Christ our Lord. Amen.

HEBREWS 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

¹¹And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. ¹²But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," ¹³and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet."¹⁴For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying, ¹⁶"This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," ¹⁷he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more." ¹⁸Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.

¹⁹Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), ²¹and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²²let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. ²⁴And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, ²⁵not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

MARK 13:1-8

¹As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" ²Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴"Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.

Sermon: "God is Getting Larger!"

Eric and I have a friend who is a nurse and midwife told me a story of the very last baby she ever assisted in birth. It was for a 19 year old girl who didn't even know she was pregnant. The girl came to the clinic with stomach pain, and they turned out to be labor pains! Well, the baby was coming along too fast to get her admitted to a hospital and the child was born right there in the examination room. As the baby emerged, and landed in my friend's hands, he opened his eyes and looked right up into her own. This is very unusual. She was startled by the profundity of the moment. It felt to her as if God was looking at her directly in the eyes.

Maybe God is, and is trying to look at us straight in the eyes. That is, after all, one way we could explain Christmas. God chose to enter into this broken and messy world so we can see him, eye to eye, face to face.

You might not want me to bring up Christmas yet, but let's face it. Like that baby who was going to be born whether anyone was ready or not, Christmas is already knocking on the door.

As we were shopping for Halloween candy, didn't you notice? Weren't you just a little suspicious of the boxes standing by in the K-mart smelling just a little bit of artificial pine trees? Haven't you already heard the piped in Christmas songs, noticed the many ornaments and toys available at the Tractor Supply? Corporate America is already preparing the way for you and your credit cards. Already our calendars are filling up with dates for activities and events and parties.

But don't dismay at the signs of Christmas around you. Do not feel overwhelmed or stressed. In fact, do not be deceived by the fake pine smell or the Christmas Muzak. For we know what it is really about. We can't start soon enough anymore to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus into this world. Maybe we can prepare for Jesus in order to combat the

onslaught of Christmas consumerism. But even more importantly, because we should always be ready to receive the King. Be ready to behold the Child, God in the Flesh, the Creator who is All in All, who opted to meet us where we are, in the dirty, flea-ridden manger smelling of animals and hay. He who was born the same way that we all were, except not conceived by humans but by God alone. Be prepared for this One.

Jesus delivers what looks like bad news to non believers but good news to believers in our gospel reading. Superficially, it may look like bad news. Wars, rumors of wars, famine, nations rising up against nations and kingdoms against kingdoms. Even the old established religion of the Jewish Temple is expected to fall, leaving no stone upon another. Perhaps we even feel the same fear that non believers feel, whenever we turn on the news and wonder just how far this terror can go. How many more shootings, how many more bombings, how many more ISIS attacks?

Jesus promises to undo all the kingdoms of this world. That kingdoms and nations and religious sects, which seek advantage over one another, religions which try to control rather than free, people who do not do God's will but defy it. Jesus promises that these shall finally be placed under God's feet. And we, God's creatures, are called to perseverance, patience, courage in the meantime. God's promises are sure. God surprised us as a defenseless little baby, to change the world, and that we would be changed, by this kind of love that risks everything.

Friends, Jesus' message is a promise, not a threat. It is a promise and a call for you and for me. He says, be ready at all times, be ready, for you just don't know when or how I shall arrive. So, since we are all being forced to think about Christmas, why not make a choice today to approach the season differently this year? Just imagine for a moment if you, in the name of Jesus, were to let go of just one thing you normally do at the holidays which brings too much

stress and seems to have lost its meaning. Or maybe instead of a thing, an attitude you want to let go of. If you do it, in the name of Jesus, I am certain God will be bigger for you. Instead of a party, use the money for charity. Instead of hitting the Black Friday sales, spend a quiet evening talking about the meaning of Christmas with your family. Instead of coming into the season afraid of how depressed, plan to pray about it. If you enter the season with a prepared heart, God will become larger for you than ever before.

When we are caught up in worship and adoration, God always seems bigger. Lucy Pevensie had a revelation at the end of the CS Lewis book, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. When the resurrected Christ figure Aslan wakes up Lucy with a lick on her cheek with his lion's tongue, she says to him, "Aslan, you're bigger!" And he says, "I'm the same size that I've always been. But with every year you get older, I look bigger..." God is able to seem even larger in your life than ever, if you make space for Jesus. Put Jesus at the top of your shopping list. Don't miss this wonderful opportunity to make room for Him, and God, who has always been as Big as He is, will grow larger and larger in you. Everyone is looking for more meaningful moments, during the holidays. This is the only way you will find Him. I offer these words in the name of Jesus, the reason for EVERY season. Amen.