

First Sunday After Christmas
Palisades Presbyterian Church
January 1, 2006

Scripture Reading: Isaiah 61:10 – 62:3

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:22 - 40

Hymns:

144 Alleluia! Sing to Jesus.

509 For the Bread Which You have Been Given

386 O For a World

On Life's Terms
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There is sense of uplifting in this morning's readings that makes it is easy to feel the celebration of the birth of Jesus and the beginning of a new time. The poetry, once more, in Second or Third Isaiah, depending on how you count, is eloquent, rising, capturing:

"I will greatly rejoice in God, my whole being shall exalt in my Creator."

It is an euphoric poem of thanksgiving. The writer simply cannot stop from proclaiming the joy:

"I will not keep silent!"

Speaking to all of Israel, the prophet tells Zion:

"You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Creator, and a royal diadem (a crown) in the hands of God."

You've come a long way Israel from the stiff-necked people!

Clearly, it had been a difficult exile for the Hebrews. A nation believing that their capture was directly linked to their disobedience, lack of faithfulness, and even sinfulness – now is free.

Naturally, then, being freed would bring with it a sense of exoneration, forgiveness, oneness with the God of their ancestor. And celebration. Their debt to the Heavenly Hosts had been paid. They had not been forgotten by God and they were, even in the midst of rebuilding, extremely grateful.

Their payment for failing the test was complete.

I am not sure why this is so, but I have never felt tested by God. It may just be the way I see the word “tested,” but I’ve never felt that way. Called to a change in behavior, yes; deeper reflection, yes; greater trust – yes. Tested, well, no.

That’s one of the reasons why whenever I read parts of the Scriptures that demonstrate God’s wrath and judgment upon those who fail their exam, such as Moses with the striking of the rock – I really see it more as the literary form of the time, presenting theological truths in the narrative, more than historically accurate descriptions of the events. Sometimes the truths and the events are more closely the same, other times the poetic departure is greater – in an effort to point to the truths more poignantly.

In some cases, the happenings are corroborated by other first hand information, supported in scientific and literary ways. In other situations, we read more of the intuition, the insight, or the vision of the author – reflecting his or her relationship with God.

I am reminded of a comment from a recent Newsweek Article that considered the historical and the mythical in the world of Christian faith. In a discussion on faith and reason, Pope John Paul II was quoted as once having said that “these two (faith and reason) are the two wings upon which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of the truth.”

We all know that that comment is not an invitation to unravel the dogma of Christian denominations, and, in fact – that comment would be seen as far too interpretive for many of our brothers and sisters who rely on a much more literal translation of events in the Bible.

In either case, we are always left with the question of what is “truth,” including the ways we consider how God has and does interact in earthly events, with devices such as “visions, calls, tests, judgments, storms, floods, and even a virgin birth.”

I am thinking about the birth of Jesus this morning, but I am also thinking about what is beyond – that birth, in terms of what it transcends. Births are always about transcendence.

In fact, in the Bible (and other earlier religious narratives) there have often been miraculous births as a way in which to set individuals apart, either for leadership purposes or as rewards for faithfulness and long-suffering. There’s Sarah giving birth to Isaac, well into her later years; then there is the wife of Manoah giving birth to Samsom; and Hannah conceiving and giving birth to Samuel. Isaac, Samson, and Samuel. These are some pretty important leaders in the history of the Jews of antiquity, made even more critical by God’s direct intervention in their

fate and that of Israel. All conceived through God's intervention, as the narratives unfold.

And even in the second testament, Elizabeth who is well beyond child bearing age becomes pregnant with Jesus' cousin, John the Baptist. Jesus got a prophet to prepare the way!

But in no instances prior has the claim been that a virgin conceived without the benefit of a man. And yet, according to Luke and Matthew, that is exactly what took place. Jesus was conceived when the Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, according to the scriptures.

The technical term is parthenogenesis, from the Greek: parthenos – virgin; genesis – beginning. Translated from the Hebrew, the Greeks however are thought to have misinterpreted part of Isaiah's prophecy, translating the word for "young woman" as virgin; a scribe's error (or Divine intervention?) that carried forth ever since. providing, perhaps, Luke and Matthew with a way of maintaining the theological truths in the literary form that connected Jesus' birth to the prophecy of the First or Old Testament and Isaiah.

It's hard to say and the debate is not new. Mark, the earliest of the gospels, makes no reference to Jesus' birth, instead his gospel begins with the adult ministry of Jesus as he arrives at the River Jordan to be baptized by John the Baptist.

John, the last gospel in the canon, subsumes all these events in his high Christological writings, his cosmic perspective of the Christ, simply by saying, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

But Luke and Matthew, the middle gospels, both – probably sharing the same source or each other's material, give us the birth narratives, from Archangel Gabriel, to a Star in the East, Shepherds, Wise Men, Herod -- and his cruelty -- if not exactly in the form of the Passover, as we know it.

So tests by God, judgment, forgiveness, literary design of the times – where does that leave us, when we come across a passage like the one in today's verses of Luke:

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Certainly Mary and Joseph, both who had been involved in the visits of archangels and the like from the beginning, would have not been surprised. But in fact they were. Why? Later, why would they not have known Jesus needed to be about his father's business when lost in the temple, and other examples?

Whether Mary and Joseph knew things as described in Luke and Matthew, or whether they grew up under quite different circumstances, the point of all gospels and the Old Testament is that these were people of faith living through times as uncertain as ours, as troubling and tragic as ours, as joyful at times as ours – without losing their belief that beyond it all there was God – be not afraid Hebrews, young wedded families, all who will listen and even those who cannot – the favor of God is upon you. Listen to some of these stories that will help you to know this even better....

They – like us – lived life on life's terms as they went about their journey. That we know is true. It is what is “ultimately true” about the Scriptures, that they all point to God in ways of the times in which they were written and according to the ability of those of the times to understand them in relative, if sometimes magical, ways.

But not for one moment, in whatever the settings was life suspended. Life continued, with daily responsibilities, the law, births, deaths, occupying armies, illnesses, celebrations, weddings, life... never stopped.

Once in my early life, suggesting that it was possible that Mary was not a virgin when Jesus was born would have gotten me expelled and otherwise punished from the parochial school of my youth – for having failed the test of faith, the mystery.

Today, I believe that God can do whatever God chooses to do and intervene in our world in any way God so chooses. However, I think God is calling us to something else beyond physical demonstrations of her, his, its depth and power. I am not always sure what that is, however I feel its pull like a magnet and know its assurance as an embrace, even in my worst of times. That's not to say that we (God and I, that is) haven't tangled from time to time, but some of this is captured in C.S. Lewis' book *The Four Loves*, when he says: “What draws people together is that they see the same truth.”

In this case, what I see is people sharing the same truth – that they cannot necessarily see, but know is there – through all of life that happens around us and the myriad ways the story has been told: we are loved beyond anything we can understand.

I have to tell you, I would love to meet an archangel! And maybe I have. I certainly believe I have met Jesus in this lifetime in others, sometimes in very powerful ways and I know that he exists, and the Holy Spirit exists, and a God greater than all I can begin to fathom exists – and that's enough to keep me going when everything else seems to be gone.

The knowing that God is there, the presence, the Shekinah, the quiet voice, the smile of another.... You just know. And the Scriptures inform that knowing in ways that go from the lyrical to the literal, and everything in between.

Staring somewhere before the time of Jesus and following his birth there was a belief system known as Gnosticism. Folks who were Gnostics subscribed to primarily doctrines of certain pre-Christian pagan, Jewish, and early Christian sects that valued the revealed knowledge of God and of the origin and end of the human race as a means to attain redemption for the spiritual element in humans. Additionally, gnosticism separated the Demiurge (among other things, thought to be the force from which evil flowed) from the unknowable Divine Being.

There were problems with this belief system, but the biggest one for the church leaders building a religion upon the birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus as the Son of God – was that it could be seen as not making Jesus necessary in one's "knowing" God. For this and other reasons – the gnostics became heretics (from the word heresy and its meaning of choice). To choose other than the doctrine put forth was to be know as a heretic.

I find a lot of value in the idea of gnosticism, in the sense that I have always felt that "knowing" of God and it has made the connection and the difference for me when faced with such seemingly contradictory texts, information, interpretations, and postulations – more so when faced with life and the human condition, trying to navigate life on life's terms.

Like a production company behind the scenes, it's good to know and be assured that all of life plays out with the ubiquitous and omnipresent God, woven into the facts, the myths, the narratives, and the unknown – always inviting us to enter more deeply in to the mystery of being loved by the Creator, Abba, Father, Mother – however you know such a presence – and that filled with that truth we gather together to go out from here into a world seeking– no, thirsting for the Good News.

Isaiah from this morning's reading -

You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Creator, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

The writer of Isaiah did not say that God put on the crown of Israel, but that God held it in God's hands.

Choose the poetry, the literary form, or the media – this life, terms and all – is in God's hands and how wonderful it is to be held, with all of you, in such good company.

A Happy and Healthy New Year – in this illusion of time to which we give a wink and a nod.

Peace.