

Devotions – April 26 – May 2, 2015
Rev. John Autio
Mission United Lutheran Church, Pelkie, MI

Sunday, April 26, 2015

Text: John 11:1-45

Then Jesus, again greatly disturbed, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone was lying against it. Jesus said, ‘Take away the stone.’ Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, ‘Lord, already there is a stench because he has been dead for four days.’ Jesus said to her, ‘Did I not tell you that if you believed, you would see the glory of God?’ So they took away the stone. And Jesus looked upwards and said, ‘Father, I thank you for having heard me. I knew that you always hear me, but I have said this for the sake of the crowd standing here, so that they may believe that you sent me.’ When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, his hands and feet bound with strips of cloth, and his face wrapped in a cloth. Jesus said to them, ‘Unbind him, and let him go.’ (John 11:38-44)

This is a very long and rich passage and much of course can be said about it. But for this reflection we will look at only the call of Jesus to Lazarus to come out of the tomb and the following command to “unbind him.” Jesus calls Lazarus to come out of the tomb out of death. This scene looks ahead to the resurrection of Jesus while at the same time setting the stage for his death. This is the reason used by the authorities to condemn Jesus to death.

On the theological level John is declaring Jesus to be the source of life. Who can give life? Only God can give life. Jesus gives life so then who is he? Jesus declares that whoever believes in him even though they die, will live and that those who believe also will never die. In Lazarus we see perhaps both of these promises brought to fruition. Lazarus is brought back to life. But we do understand that he will die again, as all flesh must do. What do we understand then about eternal life if this is the case? The raising of Lazarus shows us an important aspect of eternal life, that is it is not limited to the future, it is ours in the here and now. Yes we will die and be resurrected to eternal life but we will also be unbound to life now. A way of understanding the “unbinding” command is this: What prevents us from living in love toward one another? What keeps us from living according to God’s commands? Short answer: sin. Who forgives sin? Jesus. What is freedom from sin? The ability to live according to God’s will, in love toward God and one another. We see this unbinding begun in Baptism. We announce forgiveness to the sinner at the font and then spend the rest of our time unbinding them from sin by nurturing them in the faith and Christian life. And at our deaths we are bidden to come out of our resting places and enter into life in the presence of God.



Monday, April 27

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.’ All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

**‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel’,
which means, ‘God is with us.’ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.**

In this reading we get a portion of the Christmas Story according to Matthew. Point of view in story telling or reporting is important. What point of view is Matthew telling this story from? Luke tells the same story but from a completely different view point. Both illustrate the role of faith, obedience and Gods’ central role in the birth of the Messiah of course. The difference is this: Luke tells it through the eyes of Mary and Matthew tells the story through the eyes of Joseph! What does this unexpected pregnancy and birth look like in his eyes? It is first and foremost a moment of shame for Joseph. His honor, his claim to be a man of worth and value has been diminished if not destroyed by the pregnancy. The obvious conclusion is that Mary has been unfaithful to him, proving in the eyes of the community that he is not an honorable man. His dilemma is this: How can he regain his honor? We might understand this as being something like our concern found in the question “what will the neighbors think?” The honorable thing would be to divorce Mary. Joseph however does not choose this option. He plans to sweep it under the rug by sending her away. Note that in terms of honor and shame as understood in the Middle East of the time, the well-being of the woman is never at stake. She is the source of shame and has no honor because she is a woman. It’s all about Joseph.

Joseph takes a leap of faith as great as Mary’s when he responds positively to the message in his dream. In essence the angel tells him to forget what the neighbors think, Mary is doing God’s work and so will he if he marries her and names the child. In naming the child Joseph breaks with tradition and sets his conception of honor aside. By naming him he indicates that the child is part of his family. By naming him Jesus he tells the neighbors and the world just what this son will do: Bring forgiveness of sins. The miracle in this story is not the virgin conception of Jesus; rather it is the change of heart in Joseph. He is obedient to God rather than the neighbors and his culture.

God, too, is breaking expectations by joint humanity as one of us. Remember the theme song from “Joan of Arcadia?” *What if God were one of us?* Well, He was. That’s the Christmas Story!



Tuesday, April 28

Text: Matthew 5: 38-48

‘You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But I say to you, Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if

anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. Give to everyone who begs from you, and do not refuse anyone who wants to borrow from you.

‘You have heard that it was said, “You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous. For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same? And if you greet only your brothers and sisters,* what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

*"Be perfect." When we hear that command, most of us hear an injunction to a kind of moral perfectionism. But that's not actually what the original language implies. "Perfect," in this case, stems from telos, the Greek word for "goal," "end," or "purpose." The sense of the word is more about becoming what was intended, accomplishing one's God-given purpose in the same way that God constantly reflects God's own nature and purpose. Eugene Peterson's *The Message* gets closer to the mark, I think, when he translates it, "You're kingdom subjects. Now live like it. Live out your God-created identity." From [Working Preacher.org](http://WorkingPreacher.org) David Lose.*

If we are blessed and honored people of God and if we are declared salt and light for the world then this understanding of being perfect makes sense. Jesus has declared us to be those things and calls us to strive to live according to that call and here he repeats the call in another fashion. The Sermon on the Mount calls us to a life of discipleship and then shows us what that life might look like. It also gives us something of greatest importance: an identity. We are God’s creation called to reflect in our striving a life of witness. Our life of witness is intended to show the world what our God is like and what God intends for all creation. Will we always be “perfect” reflections of our creator and will we always live with our stumbling on the path? No, we will be seen as those who have been redeemed by God and as those who have God’s purpose for the world, not the world’s purpose for itself, as our ultimate goal. Strive on perfectionists!



Wednesday, April 29, 2015

Text: Matthew 4: 12-23

Now when Jesus heard that John had been arrested, he withdrew to Galilee. He left Nazareth and made his home in Capernaum by the lake, in the territory of Zebulun and Naphtali, so that what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah might be fulfilled:

**‘Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali,
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles—
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned.’**

From that time Jesus began to proclaim, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’

As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon, who is called Peter, and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the lake—for they were fishermen. And he said to them, ‘Follow me, and I will make you fish for people.’ Immediately they left their nets and followed him. As he

went from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John, in the boat with their father Zebedee, mending their nets, and he called them. Immediately they left the boat and their father, and followed him.

Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom and curing every disease and every sickness among the people.

This snippet of Matthew contains a double call story. There is a call to discipleship and a call to repent. The two are related in that in order to follow Jesus we have to experience a change in our lives which sets us free to do so. That change is repentance. Perhaps we frequently misunderstand what repentance means, considering it something we have to do or work at achieving rather than seeing it as grace. Repentance properly understood is an "I can't" experience rather than an "I can" experience. If repentance is promising God, "I can do better," then we are trying to keep ourselves in control of our lives. If we **can** do better, we don't need a gracious God, only a patient one who will wait long enough for us to do better. When we come before God confessing, "I can't do better," then we are dying to self. We are giving up control of our lives. We are throwing our sinful lives on the mercy of God. We are inviting God to do what we can't do ourselves -- namely to raise the dead -- to change and recreate us.

Thus if we are fishers of people, disciples of Jesus we are indeed new people eager to share the gospel story with all whom we meet.



Thursday, April 30, 2015

Text: Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, ‘Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.’^{*} This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

**‘The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.” ’**

Now John wore clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our ancestor”; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

‘I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with^{*} the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.’

This the curmudgeons favorite text for Advent and even for other times of the year. And by that I mean this is the kind of text that encourages finger wagging on the part of the righteous against the slugs surrounding them. How many times have you wanted to call certain persons “vipers?” This is a text that helps you feel good about yourself because it is easy to see yourself as the one wagging the finger. Yes sir today is the day that all we truly righteous folk get to roll out the red carpet of judgment for all you sinners! Only one thing gets in the way of the righteous truly enjoying this day of finger wagging and pointing out of sin though. It is this: there are no truly righteous people among us.

There are hopeful people yes. People struggling to repent and turn their lives around. People looking for guidance, a signpost to point the way toward salvation, but no perfect, right with God people.

John preaches a baptism of repentance because he cannot do anything else. The hidden good news in the text is highlighted by that fact. John points to one who is more powerful than he is who is coming soon. He points to one who has real life giving power, the power to forgive sins. What John points to in the wilderness is a God who is not willing to stand by and wag the finger of judgment and toss the unrighteous into unquenchable fire. He points to a God who is willing to enter into the burning chaos of human life and save it. Jesus is coming to save the unrighteous, even the ones who don't know they are unrighteous! We are called to change our ways and straighten our crooked paths and we are given the power to do so by the grace of God alone.



Friday, May 1, 2015

Text: John 1:1-18

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given

through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Christmas continues with the opening chapter of the Gospel of John. There is nothing familiar here in regard to the story as we might tell it. It does put us in mind of the creation story however. And that is important. John will have us understand Christ as eternal, existing outside of time and as our creator. Thus he is of cosmic significance. And to we who are as ants, then in this scenario what does that mean? John moves the story into a more intimate and meaningful image by announcing that this preexistent creator became flesh to dwell among his people. That is John's birth narrative. The meaning for us is that we are loved by our creator to the extent that he chooses to become one of us. John's narrative of Jesus' birth becomes a narrative our own births when he further announces that we have been given a gift of ultimate grace, the power to become God's children. This means that as God's children we will inherit eternal life. The rest of the Gospel of John will be the story of how this becomes realty for us.

Saturday, May 2, 2015

Text: Matthew 6: 24-34



‘No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

‘So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.

When the allies entered Cologne toward the end of World War II, soldiers made a house-by-house search, looking for armed enemies. In one house they discovered that people had been living in the cellar for weeks because of the bombardment. On the wall they found these words:

*"I believe in the sun,
even when it is not shining;
I believe in love*

*even when I feel it not;
I believe in God
even when he is silent."*

No one knows who these people were. With this writing they vanish from history. These people had only one thing left to them: a trust that only in God lay their hope. We don't know what became of those people, but a positive trust that they could not get beyond God's concern gave them courage to endure. Whoever wrote these words had no possessions, 401K's, bank accounts, or anything else for that matter! Only God and God's enduring care for his creation remained to them. God the Father is portrayed as compassionate, caring for his birds, feeding them as they have need. The flowers of the field are not overlooked by this caring God either. God watches over them all. So too then the life of a disciple is not lived in isolation, but under the watchful eye of a Father who attends to their needs. In a world that does not seem to care that comes as good news. Jesus invites us to remember that just as the birds of the air and the flowers of the field are part of what God has created, so too are we. Can we do any other then except to trust that the God who created us will also watch over us as well?

