

Sermon: Christmas Eve

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 24, 2015

Year C

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14

Did you know that this is the 50th anniversary of A Charlie Brown Christmas? Fifty years ago I was twelve when it aired and remember watching it... maybe my progressive Jewish parents thought it would help broaden my horizons... and it was a cartoon after all... I don't know what all the laws were then... but I heard from a reliable source... that because it was initially considered religious programming... no advertising could be sold during the broadcast that first year... but we'll come back to this animated birthday celebration in a little while...

There was an earlier period of time... when my brother had a birthday... when I was too young to be gracious... when he got a gift and I didn't... I felt excluded and had a meltdown... and so my parents... for maybe just a few years... probably wanting to avoid *another* scene... began to give me a little something too... less I think for the sake of the gift itself... but more so I felt included in the celebration and had something to open...

Then there was the celebration of Chanukah... when we lit candles... said prayers... ate *latkes*... with sour cream and apple sauce... and played *dreidel* games... and there was great expectation because we got gifts each night for eight nights... sometimes two on the same night... while our Christian friends got gifts on just one morning... in some ways... it seemed like a matter of quantity over quality... I mean I think we received our gifts imperfectly...

But this is the time of year... when many people... aided by almost non-stop advertising... think about gifts... some of us may have opened gifts before coming here tonight... some may unwrap gifts later this evening or tomorrow morning... but not

matter what we've given... we have all received the gift of the Incarnation... some people receive this gift in terms of their own self-interest... others in terms of their identity... some receive it as a transaction... others in terms of a relationship... some think only about how it benefits them... like whether they're saved or not..... others wonder how it transforms them... how it opens them to the mind of Christ...

We're all familiar with how scripture locates Jesus in a Jewish framework... Gabriel tells Mary that God will transform her... that her son will be from the house of David... from the city of David... and that God will give him the throne of his ancestor David... we know that Jesus was Jewish... he belonged to the People of the Book...

But we have insisted... even as we hold out our hands for Jesus... that our reception of him... entails God's withdrawal of a gift... from the very people of Jesus... the people that make it possible for Jesus to be who he is... the people into whom Jesus stitches the church... this is called supercessionism...

And sometimes the church needs help articulating... that God's giving Jewish flesh to the Church... in the person of Jesus... does not mean that God must withdraw God's covenant with Israel... after all... the distinguishing feature of covenantal gifts... like knowledge... or friendship... or grace... or forgiveness... or love... is that once you have given them... you still have them and can give them again...

So in the covenant with Abraham... in the gift of Torah... God gives the gift of intimacy with God first to Israel... a gift that God can give and still retain... a gift that God can give to them... then later give again to someone else without taking it back... there is a reality of boundlessness... the gifts that God gives cannot be exhausted...

I grew up with a slight sense of Jewish boundlessness... when we wrote the word G - O - D... many of us would use a hyphen instead of an O... because we knew that no word could adequately contain God... for the same reason the stained glass in our

synagogue contained no image of God... and almost no one ever said the name of God in Hebrew... YHWH... because it was almost blasphemous to believe that one could name that which could not be named...

But this is the night we name Jesus... and this is the night that our love is expressed in gifts... so I encourage you to understand Jesus as God's inexhaustible gift to us... this will help us realize that the love with which God loves us... and the forgiveness with which God forgives us... cannot be limited either... that the words we use... and the prayers we pray... and the liturgies we practice... may approach the Mystery we seek... but it is not our Mystery...

I believe that God's gift of covenant multiplies as it is given... like loaves and fishes... and since God's covenant remained with the People of the Book... even as it was given to the followers of The Way... then we must also acknowledge that God's gift of covenant may have been... or may be... given to others as well... and perhaps anyone who claims their faith as the only truth... perhaps anyone who claims their faith as right and others as wrong... does so out of fear...

In Luke's Gospel... when the angel came... the shepherds were terrified... but the angel said: Do not be afraid... the angel knew that fear can immobilize us... and when the angel shared the Good News about God's new covenant... and then left the shepherds... they let go of their fear... and went with haste to see this thing that had taken place...

Fifty years ago... Linus did the same thing...

I came across an article recently... written by Jason Soroski... who pointed out something that is right in front of us... but which many of us cannot see... Jason wrote: you may remember that in the Peanuts cartoon... Charlie Brown is best known for his zig-zag striped shirt... and Linus is most associated with his ever-present security

blanket... and throughout the story... Lucy... Snoopy... Sally and others... all work to no avail... to separate Linus from his blanket... and even though his security blanket remains a major source of ridicule for the otherwise mature and thoughtful Linus... he simply refuses to give it up...

But fifty years ago... when Linus first told Charlie Brown what Christmas was all about... just as he uttered the words spoken by the angel... fear not... his security blanket effortlessly fell from his hand... Jason wrote: looking at it now... it's pretty clear what Schulz was saying... and it's so simple that it's brilliant... the birth of Jesus separates us from our fears... the birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unwilling or unable to break... the birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping onto so tightly... and learn to trust and cling to him instead...

Linus clearly knows this... and proclaims this truth... the knowledge and wisdom and passion about it are there... but after he's done... he picks the blanket back up again... just as we do... knowing the truth here [head]... doesn't always mean that it takes hold here [heart] so easily...

The truth of it is... that in spite of the violence in the world... in spite of the crazy political rhetoric spewing from some candidates... in spite of where the media points its microphones and cameras... we are drowning in a sea of gift and forgiveness and light and grace and love... these are the powers that destroy fear... but collectively... and individually... even though we too proclaim truth and knowledge and wisdom and passion... we sometimes remain shepherds... afraid of the dark... terrified... and sometimes immobile... even when the glory of God shines around us...

We need angels... and maybe even Linus... to remind us every year... or month... or week... or maybe every day... to fear not... to free our hearts... to reject contracts in favor of covenants... and to receive our gifts more graciously and perfectly... and to go with haste to see the things that God continues to do...

And maybe you recall... at the end of A Charlie Brown Christmas... when the gathered community sings carols... Linus wraps his blanket around the bottom of the tree... and leaves it there... this is what we are called to do... this will help us all to have... a Merry Christmas!

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