

Jesus, Our Good News

Scripture: Isaiah 61:1-2a

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Morning Service

People of God: It shouldn't surprise me that newborns still draw a lot of attention, but it does. You would think that with so many newborns being born in the last two years in our congregation that somehow the novelty will wear out, but it doesn't. Every newborn still draws a crowd. I observed that again last week, with two recent newborns being present in church. A large crowd gathered around at the back of the sanctuary to "ooe" and to awe".

This morning we baptized one of those newborns. Today, Allison Marie will get her fair share of attention. That's the way it ought to be. Babies soon become the center of attention.

Now there is one particular baby that should be at the center of attention in these coming weeks and that's the baby Jesus. The Christmas season is a hectic time of year: There's shopping to do, family gatherings to attend, and many special events that fill our time.

As for shopping, I made the mistake a few years ago of going to St. Laurent shopping mall in December on a Saturday. It took me forever to get out of the parking lot. I vowed, after that, to avoid all large shopping malls in Advent. But that's easy for me to do, as we stopped giving gifts years ago in our family. But still attending our family Christmas gathering, as I will next weekend, soon takes four days out of my schedule. And there is at least one special event I want to attend: I hope to see the musical Oliver at the NAC.

Shopping, family gathering, special events—all good things in themselves but it makes for a hectic time of year. And lost in the middle of this chaos is the reason for the season: the birth of the baby Jesus.

And so, one of the basic goals of the Advent season is to help us keep focus on what is central to this time of year: Jesus. The real Jesus. But what do I mean by the "real Jesus"?

Well, the typical picture we have at Jesus at this time of year is the manger scene. We have it before us here this morning. I placed a manger

scene in front of my house to combat all the secular portrayals of Christmas. A manger scene is indeed a beginning to understanding the real Jesus—though too often we sanitize the scene. While Allison could have been born in the most modern facility, Jesus was born in a place where animals ate and slept.

But we need to get beyond even this manger scene and explore the meaning of Jesus' birth a little deeper. If we are looking for the real Jesus, what will we find? In this Advent season, Pastor Joe and I will do that by bringing together two different books of the Bible that ought to shape our understanding of Jesus: passages from Isaiah and Colossians One.

Isaiah can be expected. After all, the prophecies of Isaiah point ahead to the coming of the Messiah—to both his birth and his death. Isaiah is often quoted at this time of year. This morning we heard the words of Isaiah 61 in the lighting of the Advent Candle: The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

On the other hand, the reading from Colossians seems to be out of place. It's not your typical Advent reading. I've preached through this whole book here before, but I would not have thought of preaching this first chapter for Advent. And yet it is fitting.

Because in this opening chapter of Colossians, any tame description of Jesus is blown out of the water. Any secular view of Jesus as just another cute and cuddly baby is thrown out the window. Jesus is here presented as the One through whom the whole creation was made, the one through whom the whole creation is being redeemed. That's the real Jesus.

And so, Jesus may have been a little baby, lying in a manger—all cute and cuddly as any baby would be—but don't be fooled. This baby was no ordinary baby. He was and is the Lord of Lords and Kings of Kings. He was and is God in human flesh. This is the REAL Jesus of Christmas.

But what is that connects our two readings for today? How is the real Jesus presented in these two passages? It's the word gospel or good news. They are the same thing. Gospel means, quite literally: good news.

The Isaiah passage speaks about someone who would preach good news. To proclaim the favor of the Lord to those who desperately needed to hear it. But the person would not merely announce this good news—he would also implement it. He would bind up the brokenhearted, to give freedom to those held in captivity, to release those living in darkness.

These are all different images to describe the brokenness of life. They are images that draw upon the material, the economic, side of life. And indeed, those in poverty are often held captive to powerful economic forces over which they have no control. But these images also reflect the spiritual poverty of humanity—of being held captive to a sinful nature, of the need to be released from the darkness caused by sin.

Isaiah speaks about the time when someone would not merely announce the good news of God; Isaiah speaks about the time when that good news would be implemented. When the brokenness of this world is overcome.

And it is this text that Jesus read in his hometown of Nazareth. It is this text that Jesus said: Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing. It is this text that Jesus claimed for himself. It is this text that reveals the real Jesus.

Jesus is our Good News. Jesus is the one who not only announced good news, who not only proclaimed God's favor upon fallen humanity, he was the one who implemented it. His healings were demonstrations of the healing that God brings to our life. The times he reached out to the outcasts of society were expressions of the radical love of his heavenly Father. His teachings were intended to give shape to the renewed community of how we ought to live. And in his death and resurrection, Jesus once and for all smashed the power of sin, crushed the forces of evil and overcame the sting of death. Jesus is our Good News.

And by the time, Paul wrote his letter to Colossians, all of this good news that comes through Jesus was summarized and captured in that one word: gospel. Paul uses that word twice in verse 5 and 6. He says:

You have already heard about in the word of truth, the gospel that has come to you. All over the world this gospel is bearing fruit and growing, just as it has been doing among you since the day you heard it and understood God's grace in all its truth.

The good news of Jesus—the good news that through Jesus, God is restoring, renewing, reconciling all things—this good news was believed by the Colossians. It changed their lives. They were released from their captivity to their pagan way of thought. They gained freedom from their bondage to sin. They were reshaped into the image of their Creator. The Good News of what God accomplished in Jesus wasn't merely believed by the Colossians, it was lived out.

This Good news needs to be heard and accepted today. Throughout the world, there is a call to make things right in the world. There is a

recognition that something is fundamentally wrong in the world and something needs to be done about it.

We see it in the “Occupy” movement. However, misguided they may be, this is a reflection of the economic troubling times we are living in—as the issue of debt—personal and government debt—is challenging the economic order.

We see the need to make things right in the world also in the protest movements in the Middle East and North Africa. One country after another has seen major protests. Some have been successful in toppling dictators, but whether they will produce democratic and justice societies is highly doubtful.

Two very different movements—yet both reflect that things aren’t right in the world. But it is only through Jesus that this world can be made right again. Yes, that’s the bold and radical claim that needs to be heard: Jesus is our Good News. Jesus is the only lasting solution to making this world right again. Jesus is the answer to the spiritual condition of humanity. But Jesus is also the answer to the material condition of humanity.

The Gospel, the good news of Jesus, does not separate the so-called spiritual from the material. Jesus taught us to pray: Give us today our daily bread, as well as forgive us our debts. The Gospel includes both word and deed ministry. Jesus is the answer to the brokenness of life.

This is our Good News that we need to hear, to believe and live out. This morning it is symbolized once again in baptism. In baptism, we recognize the brokenness of every life, even Allison who seems so pure and innocent, but in reality she shares our sinful nature. She too needs the Good News of Jesus. But already now, the promises of God are extended to her.

We all need the Good News of Jesus.

If you reject the good news of Jesus, I question I would ask of you is this: What’s your answer to the brokenness of our world? What’s your solution to the presence of evil, suffering, and death in this world? What’s your hope? Is your answer viable? Will it work? Is it really better than the Good News we have in Jesus?

And for those who do believe in this Good News, the question I have for you is this: Do you live it out? Have you experienced the freedom that comes with having your sin paid for? Have you thrown off what belongs to the sinful nature? Do you live in the hope that comes from knowing in Christ death has been overcome? Do you reshape your family budget in the light of this good news? Do you work in the workplace in the light of serving your Master? If you don’t think believing the Good News raises any of these questions then you haven’t read the rest of the Book of Colossians.

May the Good News of Jesus be proclaimed again this Christmas season. May you believe it and live it out. Amen.