

01/05/2013 – Second Sunday of Christmas

“What in the world is God up to?” – Rev. Seth D. Jones ©

Scripture: *Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:1-14; John 1:1-14*

This is the second Sunday of Christmas. You may not know that the Christmas season lasts for 12 days beyond Christmas Day. We celebrate the birth of Christ in the world for all 12 days and try to understand what the other name for Jesus, “Emmanuel”, means. Matthew tells us it means “God with us”. This is quite a way to speak about God. God becomes like us in order to live with us so God can be for us and with us in every way. God comes into the world God has created for the sake of the world.

God in the world for the world: This is the great claim of Christmas time and the foundation of the Christian faith – that God is not a distant entity who does things from afar. Instead, God has entered human history and taken on human form in the person of Jesus Christ in order to redeem the world. The one who created the world has come into the world. In John 17, Jesus calls the disciples to remember they share this character now with God and with him.

*“I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world.”*

Our work is here, in this world, in this God-given creation. It is here where we learn the redemptive work of God for us. It is here where we learn why God came into the world.

John tells us why Jesus came into the world in our reading today:

*“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Lord, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.’”) And from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.”*  
(John 1:14-16)

This is what God is up to in the world – God is creating people of grace, people who are capable of receiving grace from God. In order to be people who are capable of receiving grace from God, we need to understand what grace looks like. God gives grace like a farmer sows seed. It scatters everywhere. It covers the ground, ground the Lord has prepared. As Mark tells us in the Parable of the Sower, some of the seed falls on rocky ground, some falls in thorns and bushes, some falls in sand, some is eaten by crows and some falls in fertile ground. Until we understand that we are the ones who are the crows, the rocky ground, the sandy soil and the thorns and bushes, we will not figure out how to become the fertile ground of God's grace. God's grace is already present in the seeds that have been sown. We are the ones who must receive it. God's grace, God's love, God's peace is there for the taking. It is *superabundant*.

We have to gain some perspective on who we are as God's people in order to see the grace of God which is already before us. What is usually in the way of the perspective of grace is ourselves, most particularly how we view ourselves. Paul is always concerned about how people, after they have been baptized into Christ, think of and see themselves. That is why he addresses them with such effusive language. Listen to his introduction again in his letter to the Ephesians:

*To the **saints** who are in Ephesus, and are faithful to Jesus Christ:*

***Grace** to you and **peace** from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

This is language that is meant to help the Ephesians to remember who they truly are, how they identify themselves and define themselves.

The great joy and celebration of Christmas is also its greatest difficulty. We think Christmas is all about Jesus' birth and who Jesus Christ is. And that is true. It is how we tell the story of the faith to ourselves. In the telling, however, I believe we forget something very important. We forget that the baby we look upon in the manger is there *for us*. When we celebrate the newborn Christ, we are also celebrating *who we are* in our life with God and Christ. John and Paul are both concerned with how we see ourselves, and it becomes pretty clear in John's words that we are *the redeemed, forgiven and loved children of God*.

I am pretty certain that when you go home after the service, when you are out with friends and family, when you are reflecting upon your life, you do not

define yourself in this way.

Most of us, I believe, use *descriptive* truths to define who we are. “I was born in Ohio.” “I am a dentist, doctor, minister, carpenter, fisherman.”

We may define ourselves by what we have experienced or overcome. “I am an alcoholic, former drug abuser, ex-prisoner.” “I am a survivor of sexual or physical or emotional abuse.”

We may define ourselves by heritage and history. “I am a descendant of Ethan Allen, Anne Hutchinson or William Brewster.” “I am from Ohio, Wisconsin, Maine, Africa, Asia, Hungary.”

We may define ourselves by our troubles and difficulties.

These are all true, but they are not essentially who we are. They make up part of who we are. As Christians, our self-definition is completely encompassed by God and Christ’s claim upon us. *For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.* This is who we are - those who have received grace upon grace through the person of Jesus Christ, the one whom we claim has chosen us and the one through whom we know God.

Christmas is a celebration of joy, a celebration of God in the world for the sake of the world. For many of us, myself included, the joy of Christmas is fleeting and temporary. We forget why it is such a joyful event. I believe it is because we forget *who we are*. So in your bulletin this morning, I have a thin strip of paper with a saying on it. You can tape this to your mirror in your bathroom. That way you can look yourself in the eye and say who you really are every morning. Let’s say it together right now:

*I AM GOD’S CHILD, DESERVING OF LOVE AND RESPECT,  
AND GOD WILL USE ME TO CHANGE THE WORLD. <sup>1</sup>*

I know it seems a little corny and a little weird to do something like this. Like some sort of ‘70s affirmation therapy. But my intention here is to help us reframe who we believe ourselves to be.

What would your past look like if you considered it from the perspective of someone who knows she or he is loved and respected by God?

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<sup>1</sup> This idea - the saying and handing it out to everyone - along with some of the theme of this sermon comes from my advisor at Luther Seminary, [David Lose, at Working Preacher.](#)

What would your future look like if you knew yourself to be a loved, redeemed, forgiven and respected person who God is using to change the world?

What would your relationships look like if you saw yourself as worthy of love and respect, deserving of it, not because of any entitlement or achievement on your part, but because of who has claimed you? What if you saw others as deserving of that love and respect also, since only God knows whom God has chosen?

To be clear, this isn't age-dependent or any other -dependent. It is true for every single day of our lives. Walter Breuggemann puts it this way:

*Our new life in Christ is to be "celebrated as the feast of freedom, as joy in existence and as the ecstasy of bliss."*

The joy of Christmas, the joy of God in the world, is really not about Jesus' birth at all, is it? Of course, it is because of Jesus' birth that we have our redemption and forgiveness in God. But the true joy of Christmas is *our* birth and re-birth in Christ. Listen to some of the things Paul says again in his letter to the Ephesians:

*...our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places...*

*...In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth...*

*...In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it...*

These are joyous claims. These are Christmas claims. These are things God has done for us through that little baby in the manger. I believe we lose our sense of joy when we lose our sense of who we truly are at the deepest level.

We are not the events of our past.

We are not the present circumstances we are experiencing.

We are not the pain and suffering which has been brought upon us by others or by ourselves.

We are not defined by those things.

We are, instead, defined, wholly and completely, by what we have chosen to follow in this world, defined by who has claimed us in this world, defined by the waters of our baptism and the promises we have made before God.

We are children of God who rejoice in gratitude for what God has shared with us in Jesus Christ.

We are the recipients of “*Grace upon grace*” through the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In that, regardless of whatever worldly circumstances or events, past or present, seek to lay claim to us, in Christ, we are the redeemed and loved and respected children of God who share in God’s freedom, forgiveness, fellowship, hope and love.

*And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. ... For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace.*

That is what the Lord is up to in the world.

Jeremiah has some beautiful words for the kind of people who share in this sustained joy, this way of being a ‘receiver’ of the grace of God. He says,

*“They shall come and sing aloud on the height of Zion,  
and they shall be radiant over the goodness of the LORD,  
over the grain, the wine, and the oil,  
and over the young of the flock and the herd;  
their life shall be like a watered garden,  
and they shall languish no more.*

*Then shall the young women rejoice in the dance,  
and the young men and the old shall be merry.*

*I will turn their mourning into joy;*

*I will comfort them, and give them gladness for sorrow.*

What in the world, then, is God up to? God is creating a redeemed people, a loving gathering, a joyous kingdom of people who are *radiant over the goodness of the Lord*, who share in *grace upon grace*, for the glory of the Lord.

Why? Because - let’s say it together - I AM GOD’S CHILD, DESERVING OF

LOVE AND RESPECT, AND GOD WILL US ME TO CHANGE THE WORLD.

Merry Christmas to you all and Amen!