

Nativity of the Lord

Christmas Day December 25 -Selection I, RCL All Years

Isaiah 9:2-7 - David was Israel's greatest king, and there was always hope for another one like him. However, Isaiah foresees the birth of Jesus, God's Son whose reign will be an extension of God's rule; a time when burdens will be lifted, increased joy will be experienced, weapons put away, and Jesus will reign as the Prince of Peace.

Titus 2:11-14 - Waiting for the blessed hope – that time when Christ will fully restore peace – isn't always easy. Paul instructs Titus (and us) that God has given us His grace to assist us in everyday life... a grace that will produce good works and Spirit-controlled living as we await Christ's return.

Luke 2:1-14;15-20 - "As weak as a baby!" is a common expression. While Jesus was as weak as any other baby... all of heaven understood that this infant would be the center of power! Discovered in a humble manger by lowly shepherds, Luke underscores that this birth is indeed, good news for all kinds of people – not just the great and mighty; the clever or religious. The birth of Jesus is such good news, the angels sing God's praise and their joy is echoed by the shepherds!

Good things come In Small Packages

Blink and you'll miss it. On a dark night, hurrying to get out of the cold, you might not notice another pregnant woman – one more baby. You'd be in good company. The night of Jesus' birth went unnoticed by most. Except for a few.

God went out of his way to share "tidings of great joy" with a select few. Not the religious leaders – not the wealthy kings. God made sure he got the attention of the misfits... the poor... the nobodies. Have you ever felt you fit in this category? If so, be encouraged.

God sent the angels of heaven to deliver a message of hope and acceptance to those living on the margins – to those marginalized by society. Simple people, tired enough – desperate enough – were courageous enough to believe that the Savior of the world could be found lying in a manger, cold and crying. And somehow, these misfits were wise enough to cradle Salvation to their breast.

The best things really do come in small packages. Hope, no matter how small it may seem, is still transformational. Salvation – even when cradled in your arms – is still very much a miracle.

Prayer – Almighty God, as I rejoice in the birth of Jesus Christ Your Son, let me also rejoice in the gift of your grace and salvation, revealed in Him. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

Nativity of the Lord

Christmas Day December 25 -Selection II, RCL All Years

Isaiah 62:6-12 - The words of Isaiah have a two-fold message to the hearer; God is promising so you must act. God is promising to establish Jerusalem, the City of Peace, the City of David. This is the place where the Temple resides and it represents God's reign on earth. God is making it secure and telling the people they will eat what they plant and drink what they produce which is contrary to what has happened in the past. Others have come to Israel and taken up the harvest they have planted and eaten what they worked so hard to produce. Injustice has reigned and bitterness has been sown throughout the land. God is saying no more.

Israel has a critical role to play in all of this, "prepare a way for the people; build up, build up the highway, clear it of stones, lift up an ensign over the peoples." Israel is to embody what it means to be the people of God by how she lives and proclaiming God's salvation. Jerusalem is to shout "There is a God in Israel and he is our God!"

Titus 3:4-7 - Paul seeks to remind his listeners that it is by God's mercy they have been saved. Mercy, the withholding of a just punishment, drips from the waters of the Red Sea, the Jordan River and the waters of baptism. This mercy is what grants them his Holy Spirit, by whom they are to live their lives.

Grace, receiving something beautiful we don't deserve, is the what makes us right before him. Grace and Mercy are two sides of the same coin. This is the way God works, giving us things we don't deserve (grace) and withholding from us things we do deserve (mercy). These are found most clearly in Christ our Savior whom Paul wants his readers to see as the "loving kindness of God." hope of eternal life.

Luke 2:1-7;8-20 - Joseph and Mary had to be obedient to the decree that went out for a census. This caused Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, which in first-century terms was a backwater area, certainly not a birthplace for a king. His story includes some scared teens, uncertainty, and some shepherds as witnesses to what God has done.

Angels appear to the shepherds as a certain sign of God's work and you have an interesting juxtaposition between Emperor Augustus wanting "all the world to be registered" and God acting within human history on behalf of the Emperor but also some scared teens and shepherds. While Augustus wants to take account for his empire, God is, in fact, judging it and offering redemption to it and those under its rule. One emperor wants to count his servants, the other has been born, who will die on behalf of his.

A Living Gospel

The theme of the readings is clear. God has acted on our behalf. The promise of Isaiah is fulfilled, the already-not yet Kingdom of God is at hand. Our hearts cry out "Glory to God in the highest!" Our lives matter to God. Our momentary troubles matter to God. Our socio-political contexts matter to God. He has entered human history into all of these circumstances. He has invaded our lives, interrupted them with his grace and mercy clearly seen in Jesus.

We are now called to celebrate his goodness and faithfulness to us. We are called to rejoice for all of Creation is being redeemed under Christ and our lives get to matter in a way we could never dream. They are to be signs pointing the way to the already-not fully present Kingdom of God. One in which peace, justice, grace and mercy abound. One for which we can be truly grateful and help bring forth "on earth as it is in heaven."

Prayer – God of glory, your splendor shines from a manger in Bethlehem, where the Light of the world is humbly born into the darkness of human night. Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our world, so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice, and defenders of all for whom there is no room. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

Nativity of the Lord

Christmas Day December 25 Selection III, RCL All Years

Isaiah 52:7-10 - For decades, Israel's remnant had suffered in a foreign country without an altar or priesthood. Isaiah foresees the day when the people will return to Jerusalem, rebuild their temple, and restore their God-given ministry.

Good news is worth sharing. Isaiah sees the messenger announcing peace and salvation... a message of joy and comfort.

Hebrews 1:1-4;5-12 - Old Testament prophets spoke their message out of their own life experience and Israel's. Their message was applicable to their age, and often characterized by one idea. Amos' focused upon the need for social justice. Isaiah grasped the holiness of God. Hosea's own bitter experience revealed the forgiving love of God. Each of these messages, though important parts of the revelation of the Messiah, are fragmented portions.

With Jesus it is different. He was not a fragment of the truth; he was the whole truth. In Christ, God displays not some fragmented part of himself, but all of himself.

John 1:1-14 - John allows us to see that even before Creation, Jesus was God the Son. He existed before His birth, is coequal with God the Father, and the source of light and of life itself (1:1-5). John emphasizes that Jesus is the preexistent Word (vv.6-9). To the Jew a word was far more than a mere sound; it was something which had an independent existence and which actually did things.

The awesome revelation is this: In Jesus, God Himself became flesh and lives among us (v.14).

What's the Word?

As we read today's Scriptures, the concept of sacrifice is presented to us in several different ways. Most joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King! The mere words of this carol shine hope into the darkened portions of our souls. They point out the power our words have to inspire... encourage... transform. This is the message of today's readings.

Isaiah's words envisioned a world reflecting the comfort and salvation of the Lord. To a people weary with oppression, those words inspired them to remain faithful. To the Christians receiving the letter of Hebrews, the words reminded them that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the prophets' words – encouragement during a time of persecution and martyrdom. John's gospel presents the ultimate Word, Jesus Christ. In Him, we have more than hope and encouragement – we have the very presence of God made flesh, dwelling among and within us.

Joy to the world, indeed!

Prayer – *Almighty God, as I celebrate the Gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ, help me both receive and proclaim Your Word with the confidence of His redemption and salvation. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen.*

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

First Sunday after Christmas Day

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26 - Samuel stands out as a servant of the Lord. He was a gift to Hannah and Elkanah, but also to Eli and the people of Israel. “*And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and favor with the Lord and with people.*” This is in stark contrast with Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, who didn’t serve the Lord or his people faithfully. They are called “Scoundrels” in verse 12. You see the ascent of Samuel and the descent of Eli and his family. God is doing something new for his people in and through Samuel. Out of Hannah’s despair, God moves. Faithfulness and obedience will always be rewarded, and the same words used for Samuel’s maturation will be said of another born years later in a town called Bethlehem.

Colossians 3:12-17 - Paul always encourages the saints to whom he writes, to engage in a lifestyle that is in accord with Christ’s people. In our passage, he makes a list of behaviors that demarcate the people of God. It sits in opposition to what is found in the earlier verses 5-10. It can be read as “instead of doing this, do this.”

Sexually immoral, angry, lying people don’t reflect Christ or his kingdom. Individuals who show compassion and among other things, patience and forgiveness, reveal Jesus in a more complete way. Who would you rather be around? The goal of being holy isn’t simply to be good or right. The goal is to reflect the one who made us this way. As Christians, we are to be full of gratitude and thanksgiving. This is infinitely more attractive than lying, rage, malice or any number of other behaviors that may have marked our lives before Christ made us new. This attractiveness reveals Jesus to those around us and establishes his Kingdom on earth as it is in heaven.

Luke 2:41-52 - The Festival of the Passover was a massive event. Jews from all over the region came to Jerusalem to visit, trade, purchase goods and of course, to worship. Mary and Joseph would do the same each year. They would likely travel with family and friends and when in the city, stay with more of the same. It wouldn’t be difficult to imagine Jesus playing with cousins, running about the caravan having fun. Everyone would have been looking after the children, not each parent for each child. That happy environment would change quickly when Jesus was found to be missing.

His terrified parents searched the city for three days, including the day of travel back to Jerusalem, Jesus was gone for four days! Most kids could expect a severe tongue lashing when discovered, to say the least! Mary provides a portion of one when she says, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

But Jesus flips it on her in a strange way. “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” In a normal house, under normal situations, this would likely produce a grounding or some other punishments. We don’t know how Joseph and Mary responded.

What we do know is Jesus identified the God of Israel as his Father. It was in his Father’s house you could expect to find him. Jesus was different, and Luke is giving a “heads up” to his vocation. He would later come back to cleanse the very Temple his parents found him in. Like others, including Samuel before him, he grew in favor with God and man. We will do the same when we are about the Father’s work as Jesus was.

A Living Gospel

A life of service to Christ must be centered around the work of God in the world. Service that looks nothing like Jesus or his Kingdom isn’t service to God at all. The line can be blurry sometimes, but we can all recognize hypocrisy when we see it. Eli’s sons certainly fell into that category, and if we are honest, we do as well from time to time.

So, what are we to do? Paul’s admonition to holiness is the key. If we pay close attention to our hearts, minds, tongues, hands and feet, it will be much harder to play the hypocrite. When we try to focus on the way God is using us outside of our own Christ-likeness, we can quickly lose focus. Part of being about the Father’s work is

First Sunday after Christmas Day (continued)

to allow him to swallow us entirely, consuming, not just our sin, but our wills, hopes, and dreams. This helps us focus on the work he does IN us, not just through us.

Prayer – God, you spoke and your Word became flesh, breathing a new song of joy and praise into the world. Grant that we may bear the good news of your salvation, proclaiming your promise of peace to the ends of the earth. Amen.

**Readings are from the NRSV and the Revised Common Lectionary, Year C*

Holy Name of Jesus

Numbers 6:22-27 - In pronouncing God's favor on the people, the priest was to use a prescription for blessing. This beautiful benediction's purpose is clear: the desire of the LORD is to provide His people with His name.

The name of the Lord is identical to the Lord Himself so that this blessing becomes an appeal that God will live among His people and meet all their needs. He alone can *bless* His people, *keep* them, *look on* them with favor (*make His face shine and turn His face toward them*), be *gracious* to them, and *give them peace*.

Galatians 4:4-7 - Under Old Testament Law, Israel was held prisoner, "locked up" to keep them out of trouble until Jesus came (3:23). Now as "sons of God", God has given believers His Spirit. The cry "Abba, Father," implies a clear distinction between slave and family member. Only a child has the privilege of such warm and direct address. Only a child has such immediate access to a parent. Paul's point is that "sons (and daughters)" have no need to be locked up and no need of a guardian. As sons we have direct access to God and also a matchless resource that enables us to be holy—the Holy Spirit Himself.

Luke 2:15-21 - The shepherds understood that the angels were speaking for the Lord. They believed the message and went to confirm it for themselves. Such an attitude contrasts sharply with that of the religious leaders who knew where the Baby was to be born but did not take the time or the effort to confirm it for themselves (Matt. 2:5). After seeing the Baby, the shepherds were the first messengers to proclaim the arrival of the Messiah: they spread the word, and those who heard were amazed.

Mary and Joseph carried out the pronouncement of the angel by naming their Son according to the word that had come to Mary before her Baby's conception (Matt. 1:18-21). The name Jesus is very appropriate, for it means: "Yahweh is salvation".

What's In A Name

Who are your folks? In the south, when meeting someone for the first time, it's a common practice to ask this question. Knowing the names of those who raised you instantly tells a lot about you and your values. Depending upon your family, the simple act of knowing your name can open doors, create opportunity, and earn favor.

Through the gift of His Son, God has adopted us into His family, giving us His name. Through Him, our place in this world – and in the world to come – is secure. We bear the name of Christ; our identity is now linked directly to God through Jesus. As members of God's family, we are blessed and kept. God looks upon us with favor and is gracious, giving us His peace.

Take seriously the privilege and power of bearing the holy name of Jesus Christ!

Prayer *"Holy God, stir in my heart the love of Jesus, Savior of the world, and the grace of Your Spirit to worthily bear Your name before a watching world. Blessed be God now and forever. Amen."*

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Second Sunday after Christmas (Alternate years)

Jeremiah 31:7-14 - Jeremiah sees the day coming when a restored and reunited Israel would enjoy a new covenant relationship with God... a time when the people would be spiritually as well as physically restored.

Despite Israel's faithlessness, Jeremiah reminds the Israelites – and us – of God's love and forgiveness. By recalling the exodus from Egypt, we're reminded of God's provision in the wilderness, and are reassured that removal from God's land does not mean removal from His love.

Ephesians 1:3-14 - Paul writes to Ephesus and the surrounding communities to bring together two groups of people. Gentiles are those outside the historical faith of Israel and Jews who have come to know Christ and still see themselves as Jewish. These two groups are very different from one another and have a hard time seeing that it is Christ who gives them their identity, not their past and not their culture.

He points out all of the blessings each group has in Christ and that one group is not better than another and goes so far as to say that because of the Holy Spirit, whoever has received the Spirit, they are the people of God, Jew, and Gentile alike.

John 1:9;10-18 - John's Gospel is unlike the others we find in the Scriptures. Matthew, Mark and Luke are called the synoptic Gospels. Synoptic literally means to "see with". They have similar sources, tell similar stories and have deep socio-historical grounding.

John's Gospel is much more theological in nature. He draws upon themes to help the reader clearly see who Jesus was and is and the first verses lay those themes out for the reader to see.

As Lesslie Newbigin points out in his commentary *The Light Has Come*, you see themes such as life, light and darkness prominently in the beginning of the chapter. Further, there is talk of the Word. Greeks would recognize this as Logos, and Jews as the spoken Word of God, the creative force behind creation. This Word, John claims is God and it is by and through him that all things are and have been. In fact, this Word was a man (verse 14). Jesus. John claims Jesus to be God in the flesh in opening movements of his Gospel which gives the readers knowledge that those in the stories don't possess. This understanding will transform those in the stories and invites the readers of his Gospel to be transformed into "children of God" as well.

A Living Gospel

Believing what God says transforms us. Trusting in him for who we are and what we are to do makes us different people. Scriptures teach us we move from darkness to light, sinner to saint, exile to child, death to life and any number of other metaphors to help us understand the change that takes place when we place our trust in Christ.

These Scriptures confront our very experiences. We do not often feel like rejoicing or dancing. It is hard to see and feel how we are blessed, chosen or adopted. Grappling with being God's child is completely counter to what most of us experience in our daily lives. And yet here they are. Calling, whispering, beckoning us to something beyond ourselves. We are invited to find ourselves within the story of God, within a story of redemption and hope.

How can we do this? It is one thing to say it but to practice these truths is quite another task.

Make a list of all the things Paul says are true of you from Ephesians chapter one. Words like blessed, chosen, holy, blameless and so on. Take one characteristic each week and pray daily that God would help you to see what it means to be that thing. "Lord, show me what it means to be forgiven (for instance)." As you practice placing yourself under the truth of the Living Word you will find yourself transforming slowly but steadily and you will find yourself becoming part of the story of God.

Prayer – We bless you, Abba, Father, for you have visited your people in one like us in all things but sin, and in human fragility you have revealed the face of divinity. Gather into your arms all the peoples of the world, so that in your embrace we may find blessing, peace, and the fullness of our inheritance as your daughters and sons." Amen.

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