

His Birth Changes Everything

December 22, 2019

Fourth Sunday in Advent

Fourth in a Series of Sermons, “Making Advent All About Jesus”

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Isaiah 7:14 - Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign, “Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Dear Friends in Christ,

About 25 years ago or so, a Lutheran School teacher named David and I were supervising a youth car wash at our local convenience store and gas station. At a certain point, we didn't have many customers, and so I left my friend Dave in charge, and then youth did what you would expect youth to do, when they have a source of water in their hands. They had a water fight. A water fight which escalated into spraying a few of the customers coming into the convenience store. And generally speaking, customers getting sprayed as they put gas in their cars don't necessarily have a sense of humor about it. Nor did the owner of the convenience store, also a friend of mine, he called me on Monday morning, and his first question was, “Who was in charge?”

That was the question of one of my Facebook friends, whose teenage son has had all kinds of problems in life and recently was getting bullied in school. She cut loose with an r rated rant on social media. I quote her almost word for word, “*Why my kid, why this if God is (expletive) real why does he allow this (expletive) to happen to kids, people in general, but why my son. God (expletive) it why he doesn't deserve this please take it back, please god if you are real, I'm begging you make this go away. They say you are all powerful? Prove it. I'm on my knees don't you (expletive) hear? Don't my cries, my pain calling out to you, doesn't it mean anything to you? His pain, are you enjoying him suffer inside. Just make it go away.*”

Perhaps you have had those times in life where the troubles and the trials were so overwhelming that you wondered if God was real, and if He is real, is he really in charge? By nature we like to be in charge of our own little corners of the kingdom, we like to be captains of our own ships, or at least co-captains with God. On those days when we are particularly full of ourselves, we end up doubting God's providence, we refuse to be guided by His Spirit, and we pay a steep price in terms of frustrations and disappointments, many of them self-inflicted.

The theme of our sermon series in December has been “Making Advent All about Jesus.” Three weeks ago - His Mountain is the Highest. Two weeks ago, “His Roots Bear the Best Fruits. Last week, “His Promises Are Worth the Wait.” Today, His Birth Changes Everything. In our three appointed lessons for this Fourth Sunday in Advent, we have three examples of how the birth of Jesus Christ changes everything, and in response to the question, “Is God really in charge around here?” the answer is a resounding “yes!”

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Example #1 of how the birth of Jesus Christ would change everything comes from today’s Old Testament lesson, where God is tenderly inviting Ahaz to trust and obey, **Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, “Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.” But Ahaz said, “I will not ask, and I will not put the Lord to the test.**

The context of this conversation is that God had sent Isaiah to confront King Ahaz and to call him to firmly trust in God no matter how fierce were his enemies. Ahaz is to name a sign so that God could tangibly confirm what he has promised and move Ahaz to believe. This is one of several examples in Scripture of God going the extra mile in terms of being patient with a weak faith.

Now in this case, Ahaz refused to ask for a sign, he stubbornly resisted the guidance of God, but God gave him a sign anyway. In fact he gave him two signs, one for the short term, and one for the long. The sign for the near future is that in the time it takes for a child to be born and weaned from his mother, God would be delivering Judah from the judgment being threatened by two neighboring kings. The sign for the distant future is that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son, and his name would be Immanuel. The very Creator of life would become a fertilized egg, He would be formed as all children are formed in their mother’s wombs, He would take on human flesh and as an infant would be laid in the manger. The Christmas story changes all of human history. It is Example #1 that God is in ultimate control in life, which leaves us mere mortals to be in charge of our own little corners of this world.

Dear friends, whether you are in charge of a youth group washing cars or a single mother raising up your teenage son or a grandma hosting her family for a holiday meal or the manager of a busy retail store, you bear responsibility for your own little corner. On the one hand you may trust that God has a plan to work all of life’s circumstances for the good of those who love God, and on the other hand, your assignment is to be faithful in managing your own treasures, your own talents, and your own time.

Example # 2 of how the birth of Jesus Christ changes everything comes from today’s Epistle lesson, where Paul is inviting the New Testament Church to trust and to obey, **Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations.**

Paul repeatedly referred to himself in his writings as the servant or the slave of Jesus. And even though he ended up being one of the greatest, if not the greatest Christian missionary of all time, he had his moments where he wanted to be the captain or at least the co captain of his own ship. He writes in Romans 7 about how nothing good dwells inside of him, about

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how he had the desire to do what was right but not the ability, **“I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I keep on doing.”**

For Paul, the birth, the life, the death, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ changed everything. He was absolutely amazed that God could take him, the chief of sinners, and make him into an apostle that would be instrumental in taking the Gospel to the far corners of the world. Although Paul intellectually agreed that God was in charge, he confesses that his sinful nature often called the plays.

Dear friends in Christ, perhaps you can speak in front of thousands or you would rather die than speak in public, perhaps you can sing like an angel or can't carry a tune to save your soul, perhaps you have a dozen grandchildren or one or zero, perhaps you've gotten a handle on your bad habits in these days, or maybe you're on the edge with a head almost ready to explode, no matter what is going on in these days, do be spending time at the manger in this season. Understand one more time that the birth of Jesus Christ not only changes human history, it has the potential to change your heart. Your God is a God of second chances and new beginnings.

On the one hand, you may relax and be still and know that God is God, and on the other hand, never forget your assignment to be a faithful steward in every one of your days of your specific treasures, your particular talents, and the number of days you have been granted.

Example #3 of how the birth of Jesus Christ changes everything comes from our Gospel lesson, where an angel of the Lord is inviting Joseph to believe the impossible. The context is that Mary and Joseph were betrothed. In other words, they had not yet consummated the marriage, and the penalty for a young lady being pregnant in that culture could be death by stoning. Joseph, who had to be absolutely devastated by this out of wedlock pregnancy, had decided to take a gentler option, he would divorce her quietly and move on with life.

As Joseph considered these things, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is the Holy Spirit.

One more time we see how patient and how tender is our God. The angel goes on to tell Joseph in this dream how really it is God's child Mary is carrying, how they need to name him Jesus because he would be saving the whole world from their sins, how this child was in fact the Messiah long promised.

And then Joseph wakes up. As it turns out, the whole Christmas story hinges on whether Joseph will believe the dream or not. If Joseph believes the dream, everything is on. The

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story can continue. Mary will have a home and a family and her child will be born the son of David. But if Joseph does not believe, then everything grinds to a halt. If he wakes up from his dream, shakes his head, and goes on to the courthouse to file divorce papers, then Mary is an outcast forever. She would be either killed by her family for disgracing them or disowned by them and left to scratch out her living however she can, feedings herself and her illegitimate child on whatever she can beg or steal.

As you know well, this story has a happy ending. It could well be on Hallmark TV channel! The heart of this story, from Joseph’s perspective, is that a just man wakes up one day to find his life wrecked, his wife pregnant, his trust betrayed, his name ruined, his future revoked. He surveys a mess he has had absolutely nothing to do with, he decides to believe that God is present, that God could be trusted. On the one hand, he trusted that God was in ultimately control, and on the other hand, God had chosen him as a mere carpenter to raise up and be responsible for the very Son of the living God.

I come from a long line of carpenters and brick layers and construction kinds of people, although not one bit of carpenter and construction skills made its way into my DNA. My wife will attest to that. My uncle Cleo was my Godfather, he was a terrific carpenter, and quite the jokester. He had only gone to school through 8th grade, and as I was going through four years of college and then to the seminary for another 4 years, he asked me at one of our family reunions how many years I had to go to school. When I gave him the answer, he looked up in the air, smiled a bit, he winked and then said, “you must really be stupid to have to go to school for all those years!”

I don’t know if Joseph the carpenter was a jokester, but we do know that he is an example of an ordinary person called on by God to carry out an extraordinary assignment.

The kingdom of God is like a medium sized church in a medium sized community full of ordinary people who on the one hand sin and fall short of God’s expectations every day, and on the other hand have received grace, they have been given opportunity, they have experienced the patience and the tenderness of God in heaven above. On the one hand, they rest in the truth that Jesus Christ is sitting on the right hand of His Father, ruling all of heaven and earth with authority. And on the other hand, the Advent message is stirring up their hearts, they know they bear great responsibility in their own little corners of the kingdom. Amen.