

MOVING PAST CHRISTMAS

Epiphany 2 – Cycle A: Isaiah 49:1-7; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

At our Epiphany Dinner, yesterday, I sat across the table from a woman who told me that this year she just couldn't get enough Christmas. She left up her tree longer than she ever had before, kept out her decorations, and, without embarrassment, declared to anyone within earshot that she had wanted the season to go on and on. Really, she was the perfect audience for our Christmas-in-January, turkey-with-all-the-trimmings meal. We should try and find a few more like her.

I didn't say anything in response to her pro-Christmas pronouncement, but could have told her that by New Year's this year, I was all celebrated-out! We had had a solid week of Christmas services, guests, eating, gift exchanges, and socializing, and I was ready for it all to be over. Unlike other years when I stubbornly adhere to observing the whole twelve days of Christmas, I spent a good part of this year's New Year's Day, day eight for those of you who are counting, removing the decorations from the tree, liberating the tree from the stand, and only breathing a huge sigh of relief when I had successfully dragged l'arbre de Noel out to the curb and vacuumed up the last needle from the floor. It was an odd feeling, being a pastor and all, hungering to return to normal, but I chalked up my readiness to move on to the busy-ness of the week that began December 23 and ended December 31. We had very little down-time during those nine days. When I came back to the church, on January 2, after a short Christmas break, people asked the inevitable, "How was Christmas for you this year?" "Intense!" was the best answer I could come up with.

I asked our Confirmands the same question at our first class after New Year's. They immediately began telling me about all the gifts they had received; and I realized that when you are 11, 12, or 13 years old, Christmas is more a festival of gifts than anything else. It's good to get together with family and friends; we love the Christmas Eve Candlelight service, hearing the account from Luke about Jesus' birth, singing Christmas carols almost non-stop for over an hour; at home, we love sitting around the tree and allowing the magic of the lights, decorations, and perhaps even candles to suggest the best Christmas ever, but for the teenage soul, I believe that Christmas is mostly about gifts. And perhaps it is so for most of us, whether we're entirely comfortable with that notion or not. We enjoy giving gifts and receiving gifts. Gifts are a big part of the preparation and celebrations for most people. Christmas, among other things, is about gifts.

These thoughts came to mind when I first looked at our three readings for today. All three describe a gracious, giving God, providing gifts that will bring people wholeness.

The passage from Isaiah is a little confusing, partially because most of the other servant songs in Isaiah understand the servant to be the Hebrew people; they will become a servant people, as it were, who will call all nations to the One God. Isaiah 49 does not fit easily into this interpretation because the servant has been called not only to make God known to the Gentiles, but also to bring back to faithfulness the Hebrew people themselves. The context of the servant songs is the Babylonian Exile, a dark time in both the spiritual and national life of God's chosen ones. The servant in this passage has received the prophetic gifts of *call* – "before I was born, while I was in my mother's womb" Isaiah writes, "he named me." The servant has also been given a mouth like a sharp sword, and understands his or her effectiveness as a prophet to be as precise and deadly in his writing and preaching as a polished arrow. The servant is richly endowed for the call he or she has received.

And so it is with the many servants and prophets God calls through the living Word. "O God of light," we sing, "your word a lamp unfailing, shall pierce the darkness of our earthbound way." God's faithfulness, God's activity within and among the people of God is an immeasurable *gift!* It may not be a gift we connect immediately with Christmas, but it is certainly within the tradition of Christmas. Think of Mary's song in which the mighty and proud are brought down and the meek and lowly are lifted up. The reforming, renewing Word of God is very present in, with, and under the gifts of Christ's entering the human condition.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthians, our Second Reading, he places his finger on the beauty and truth of God's incarnation in Jesus, the Incarnation we just celebrated at Christmas. To the congregation at

Corinth, he writes, "I give thanks to my God...because the grace of God has been given you in Christ Jesus...in every way, you have been enriched in him...you are not lacking in any spiritual gift...He will also strengthen you to the end...God is faithful; by [God's action, God's intervention in human history] you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."

Paul describes a completely new landscape for believers, a landscape of faith that has been articulated and remade through the blessing they have received, the *gift given*, of Jesus. Where there had been doubt about God, there is now certainty; where there had been fear concerning divine judgment, there is now trust; where there had been despair at unknowing, there is now hope in the knowledge they have received through the gospel proclaimed by Jesus not only in word, but also in his very birth and in his saving work of teaching, preaching, healing, dying, and rising again. You have received an unbelievable and unprecedented gift, Paul tells the Corinthian assembly. As Isaiah's servant was equipped for prophecy, so you who have been baptized into Christ, are equipped for consecrated discipleship!

Finally, we turn to today's Gospel, in which we find one of the several epiphanies John the Baptist has concerning Jesus. Referring to the idea of sacrifice in temple worship and the sacrifices offered to God by the ancestors, John the Baptist identifies Jesus as the Lamb of God.

Without question, John the Evangelist advances the doctrine of substitutionary atonement for the salvation of the world by having John the Baptist introduce Jesus as the Lamb of God early in his gospel, an understanding of Jesus we touch very lightly these days. Jesus as sacrificial lamb, if this is a helpful interpretation of who Jesus was, must relate only to God's offering of Jesus to suffer in the fullness of his humanity, to become at-one with the human condition, and through that human suffering, to accomplish sacrifice and solidarity by (as one of our hymns says) "dignifying" the human condition. The 18th and 19th century theology that fuelled the Great Revival and gave birth to Evangelical Fundamentalism in North America is problematic because of how it distorts every new idea of God that Jesus taught. It's simple, it's clear, but it is not in continuity with the core message of grace in the gospel.

By contrast, there is something profoundly significant in God's offering a lamb for the purpose of teaching and communicating grace and faithfulness, as opposed to an angry God, so enraged at the sinfulness of people that a human sacrifice - and not just any human sacrifice, but God's only begotten Son - can be the only hope against the destruction of sinners in the eternal fires of hell and the only means of restoring all that has been lost to Satan. What is wrong with this picture? Everything!

Jesus was not that kind of lamb. And the God of Israel, especially according to the later prophets, was not that kind of God. Jesus was and is a gift, as surely as the ram caught in the thicket was a gift on the day Abraham was about to sacrifice Isaac. Isaac received back his life, because of God's intervention. And this is a better understanding of God's gift to the world of Jesus: in and through Jesus, we learn and find faith in a God whose purpose is salvation; a God who *loves* people into faith and salvation. Jesus as Lamb of God most certainly takes away the sin of the world, but it is *through love* that sin and death are defeated - God's love. The angry God theology evaporates in the victory of Christ's resurrection.

There comes a time in our celebration of Christmas, usually about the same time we take down the tree, that our gifts are finally removed from their boxes and bags and put into use. As much as we love the romance of gifts under the tree, we must take what we have been given from what is left of the wrapping and bows, and put these lovely new things to use. We must move past Christmas or it is as if nothing has been given and nothing has been received.

So it is with the gifts God gives us to accomplish God's saving and redeeming work in our world. Like the servant, we have prophetic gifts, the gift of faith, and the gift of call. Like John the Baptist, we are able to see things and interpret things that help our understanding of who God is and who the people of the world are, because of God. We all benefit, as did the Corinthian followers, from the full revelation of Jesus Christ in our midst. We have been fully and finally enriched (to use Saint Paul's word) by Jesus, his birth, life, ministry, suffering, death, and resurrection. We have met God in Jesus and have received the gospel he not only preached and taught, but that he embodied in his living, his dying, and his rising again. Our call is to love him, live for him, and welcome him into our world. Jesus as the living Word of God is the gift that allows us to move past Christmas into the heights and depths of consecrated discipleship and through such discipleship to walk the way toward wholeness. Our God is the God of light, and the gospel

we have received in and through Jesus of Nazareth is the light our dark old world needs so badly. Taking that light past the pivotal event of Christmas is our call. Receiving the gift of Jesus and enlarging it by being all for Jesus in everything we say and do is our call. Giving the gift of Jesus to others and thereby honoring the giver and the gift is our call. Moving past Christmas: can we do it?