

Sunday December 1st, 2019

Advent I

**PRAYER:** The “day that shall come to pass” is now! The “house of the God of Jacob and Rachel” is here! O God, be with us in these moments in this place, that in days to come we may remain with you as we walk in the world. Amen.

**WORDS OF ASSURANCE:** Jesus said that anyone who hears what he says and trusts in God has eternal life. The time is coming; indeed, it is already here. All who heed God’s voice shall have life and that, indeed, eternal. Rest in the assurance of God’s grace made known to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.

**STEWARDSHIP:** God’s will is revealed in hidden place. We are told to be ready, because Jesus comes at a time we do not expect. We are told to clothe the naked, feed the hungry, and visit those in prison. May God quiet our fears, so that we may venture confidently into the unknown and minister to stranger sin our midst. As a demonstration of that confidence let us now offer our tithes and offerings with the attending prayer that God’s love will be revealed through them.

**PASTORAL PRAYER:** Gracious God, you have spoken to us from the heights. On Mt. Sinai you declared your law and entered into covenant with your people. On Mt. Zion your spirit filled the temple and received the praises of your people. On the Mt. of Olives your Messiah turned aside to pray and began to offer himself as a sacrifice for your people.

We thank you, O God, that, despite being so different from us, you do not ask to be left alone. Instead, you call us to take our place on the mountain. You summon us there to receive your judgment and your peace. And you promise that there we shall behold the One who reveals your glory. Yet while our hearts long to climb your holy mountain, our lives trap us in the valley. We feel helpless to reach our destination. You command us to love our neighbours as ourselves, but we afflict them with cold hearts, quick tempers, thoughtless tongues, and heartless deeds. You call us to become your peacemakers among the nations, but we continue to beat plowshares into warships and pruning hooks into missile heads. For this preoccupation with ourselves and the mischief to which it leads us, we are truly sorry, and we pray for deliverance.

O God, make us open to the people around us and the miserable world in which they live. Multitudes of your children suffer out of sight. Give us open eyes. Today their cries for help are muffled. Give us open ears. Their pain is often borne alone. Give us open hearts. Their hope and healing are ours to grant. Give us open hands.

You tell us, dear Lord, that we owe no one anything except our love. Now we ask you to teach us the cost of that love. Enable us, as you enabled Jesus, to pay that cost in gracious service to humanity.

**BENEDICTION:** O God of new beginnings, make us a people of new beginnings. Let the works of our hands reflect the works of your hand. Let us mirror the light that illumined the deep and brightened a cold, dark stable. Amen.

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Isaiah 11:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55

Series: God's Christmas Gifts.

Part 1: "Good News to the Poor."

Bennett Cerf, tells the story of a woman in Salt Lake City Utah, who was a bit behind in her Christmas preparations. She bought, at the last minute, a box of one hundred identical Christmas cards, and, not even pausing to read the message inscribed thereon, feverishly dispatched them to the ninety-nine relatives and acquaintances whose own greetings already were displayed on her piano top and fireplace mantel.

Some days later, she accidentally picked up the one card left, and read what it said in a state of shock: "This little card is just to say, 'A gift you'll love is on its way.'" I think there were going to be a large number of very disappointed people who received those promissory Christmas cards. I wager that a large number of us in this room today have, at least on one occasion, been promised something wonderful, only to have the promised not fulfilled. The memory of that unfulfilled promise may still cause us some pain.

Well, I noticed that the gift of Jesus, which we celebrate at Christmas, and is from God the Father, also had some promises associated with it. I realize that we all enjoy, at least to some extent, remembering the baby in a manger, and how that birth fulfilled the prophetic promises of long ago. Jesus, we believe, and rightly so, is the ultimate Christmas gift from God, but in the back of my mind there remains a nagging question. What exactly does the gift of Jesus mean specifically for us?

When I receive gifts at Christmas, there is usually some implied benefit to me. Although I have received some things which prompt me to think, "What on earth were they thinking?" but I digress. If I receive a sweater, it is because it will keep me warm. If the gift is music or DVD's, I will be entertained. If it is chocolates or other goodies, I will have my taste buds tantalized and my wife Laura worried. Even the little joke gifts we sometimes get, have a point, even if they are just an inside joke among family or friends.

What therefore, if I may be so bold, is the point of Jesus' birth? What benefit, if any, is there implied for us? So, what I propose is that we begin our journey through Advent by remembering how Jesus described himself, and the purpose of his life and ministry. In Luke 4:18-19 Jesus is in his home town reading the scripture during the Sabbath service. He opens to Isaiah 61:1-2 and reads the following.

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has anointed me to preach Good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim that captives will be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favor has come. Then Jesus adds as commentary, this Scripture has come true before your very eyes!*

I count no less than five promises, or benefits to Jesus' incarnation begun at Christmas, and each of them on their own is significant and life changing. Add to that Jesus' declaration that these words are fulfilled, right in front of those in that synagogue.

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Put this all together, and I would argue that in front of us today are promises of good things because of Jesus' first coming at Christmas, and we should sit up and take notice. On our first stop in Advent we want to focus on Jesus' promise to us that he has come and been anointed by the Holy Spirit to "preach Good News to the poor."

This promise of care and advocacy for the poor is consistent with Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus' coming. In Isaiah 11:4 we read that "He (meaning the Messiah) will defend the poor and exploited". In our gospel lesson, which is called the *Magnificat*, we read in verse 53, "He has satisfied the hungry with good things and sent away the rich with empty hands." To say that God has a heart for those who live in poverty is an understatement.

God's displeasure at the lack of care and concern, for the poor and marginalized, is a consistent and common theme all through scripture. In Matthew 25 we are warned that how we deal with "the least of these", meaning the poor, will be the basis on which we are seen as representing Christ or are "unknown to him". In Luke 16 we have the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, again linking care of the poor to our judgment.

You get the point. The poor are close to the heart of God. And quite frankly there are a lot of folks, who because of poverty, are very close to the heart of God. According to statistics in the fall 2010 CBM magazine *Mosaic*; as many as 1 in 6 persons in this world live in "extreme poverty". That equals about 1 billion people. According to the UN Millennium Development Goals, the definition of "extreme poverty" are those persons whose measured income level is at less than \$1 (US) per day.

People in extreme poverty almost always have poor access to education; particularly girls who suffer from gender inequality. They experience high infant mortality rates, higher infections of HIV, malaria, and other diseases. They have limited access to medical care and life saving medications. The extremely poor often suffer from poor environmental conditions, like contaminated water, lax pollution controls on industry, and desertification of once fertile farming land, seen clearly in sub-Sahara Africa.

People who live in poverty are not just in city slums. They also are in rural areas, aboriginal reserves, and in every country. Closer to home, I mentioned a few weeks ago the United Way report entitled "A Living Wage" describing through research what it takes to make ends meet in Haldimand and Norfolk. The conclusion was that it takes an hourly wage of \$16.58 for a work week of 35 hours to manage a family's needs.

11.7 % of families and individuals in Haldimand-Norfolk are considered to live in poverty. Simcoe is 17.2%. All of us here probably know several stories of people struggling just to get by. Maybe you yourself are struggling to make ends meet. How many of us are just one paycheck away from disaster? How many of us fear getting seriously sick, and having no benefits to pay for medications or guaranteed sick leave?

No wonder so many of us are so anxious. So, when Jesus declares that he has come to "preach good news to the poor", what exactly does that mean?

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I am sure that part of what Jesus is declaring, is God's solidarity with the poor and God's rapt attention to the poor. I am sure that part of Jesus' declaration, amounts to a call for us to take up the cause and advocacy of the poor.

However, is it just words? I mean anyone one of us can make declarations about anything at all. We can also say we care about the poor, but what good does that do? In James 2:15-16 reads, "Suppose you see a brother or sister who needs food or clothing, and you say, 'Well, good-bye and God bless you; stay warm and eat well'-but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do?"

So, what exactly is the good news here? In our Gospel lesson Mary magnifies the Lord, proclaiming God's greatness and rejoicing in God as Savior. She begins with God's actions in her own life, for in choosing her to be the mother of the messiah, the Mighty One has indeed "done great things for" her. Elizabeth has just welcomed and honored her, saying, "blessed is she who believed." Now she recognizes with awe that not only Elizabeth, but all generations will call her blessed.

In our culture blessed has become a meme, and "feeling blessed" makes regular appearances in Facebook posts. People tweet images or post pictures of themselves enjoying a delicious meal, an exotic vacation, or a shopping spree at their favorite store. "Blessed" has come to mean living a life of privilege and comfort. Using the term has become a way of celebrating those moments when everything is going well and all seems right with the world -- or at least one's own little corner of it.

The blessedness that Mary celebrates stands in stark contrast to our culture's attitude. By our standards she does not look at all blessed. God has chosen her to be the mother of the messiah, but in practical terms what does that mean for her? She is not from a family that can afford expensive food or clothing. She is a nobody, a peasant girl from a small village. Her friends and neighbors see her as a disgrace because she is unmarried and pregnant (see Joseph's initial reaction to her pregnancy in Matthew 1:19).

Furthermore, as she will soon learn from Simeon, if she hasn't perceived it already, being the mother of the Messiah is scarcely an unmixed blessing. She will bear the unspeakable grief of watching as her son is: rejected, shamed, and crucified. "This child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel ... and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (Luke 2:34-35). Despite all this, Mary praises God for honoring her.

Mary sings about the God who saves not just souls, but embodied people. The God she celebrates is not content merely to point people toward heaven; God's redemptive work begins here on earth. God fills the hungry not only with hope, but with food. Rather than being satisfied with comforting the lowly, Mary's Lord lifts them up, granting them dignity and honor, a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation.

At the same time, God shows strength by disrupting the world's power structures, dethroning rulers, and humbling the mighty.

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Both in Mary's song and in Jesus' ministry we see the God who *loves* us as we are but does not *leave* us as we are. Zacchaeus, for example, shows us God's saving love in action. As a tax collector, Zacchaeus is wealthy, but he is also a scorned outsider. When Jesus invites himself to dinner at Zacchaeus's house, the encounter leaves Zacchaeus welcomed into community, emptied of his wealth, and profoundly changed.

His gaze is redirected from himself toward Jesus. He no longer sees only his own needs and desires. Now he sees those whom he has harmed in his quest for money and security. Jesus brings Zacchaeus down from his wealth and up from his shame. In the process he frees him. Salvation has come to his house (Luke 19:9).

When God empties the rich of their excess and fills the hungry with good things, the result is not social reversal -- with the powerless and the powerful changing places -- as much as it is social leveling.

The rich and powerful are stripped of their arrogance and taught to love their neighbors as they love themselves. Thus, God provides for the poor and honors the humiliated. When the arrogant are scattered and the powerful brought down, then every person has access to enough of the world's resources, and no one has too much. Every person is treated with dignity and respect, and no one uses power to harm.

Mary's song magnifies the Savior who loves the whole world with a love that makes creation whole. God's saving judgment is for all of us, bringing us down from the pride that fills us with ourselves until we can't see either God or neighbor, bringing us up from the shame that distorts our worldview and convinces us that no one -- not even God -- could love us. The mother of the Messiah has experienced God's blessing.

She is not #blessed. Her blessing, like ours, is a cross-shaped blessing, "a condition of complete simplicity (costing not less than everything)" as T. S. Eliot so memorably said, yet bringing true freedom, the priceless gift of God's salvation.

Jesus Himself said he was anointed by the Spirit or another way of expressing it is "the Spirit of God is upon me." We know from the story of Pentecost that the Spirit of God is also on Christ's church; which is you and me. The Spirit of God is a game changer for the world. Because of the Holy Spirit, poverty is no longer on the back burner in God's agenda for the church.

The real issue for us to consider is, are we as Christ's followers truly good news to the poor. When those who are marginalized in our society encounter us, is it a positive thing? As Mary sings in Luke 1, "He has not forgotten his promise to be merciful", but have we forgotten to be merciful in his name? Do we suffer from a selective memory when it comes to who we value and who we deem worthy of our care and concern?

Maybe, part of the good news to the poor, is that our indifference doesn't have to be the last word. As the poor long for a change in their circumstance, we can long for a change in our hearts towards the poor.

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We can recognize that our attitude towards the poor is to be instructed by God in Christ; and not by politicians, or public policy think tanks.

Maybe the good news is that we no longer feel compelled to blame the poor for their situation. That when a large proportion of residents in our major cities and towns are living on low incomes, there is more going on here than systematic abuse of the welfare system. Part of the good news, is being able to see the broader implications of public policy and how it adversely affects those who are most vulnerable.

Have we been good news for those who are in poverty due to disabilities, mental illness, substance abuse or systemic discrimination? Are we good news to the poor when we go to the ballot box on Election Day? Are we good news to the poor when we complain about subsidies to help low income Canadians receive: dental care, vision care, food supplements, public housing and a whole host of other programs?

In our fallen human nature, we are never good news to anyone, but Christ offers us new life and new priorities. On a positive note, the situation in regards to the poor is actually better than it would be without Christians involved. That too is good news!

Despite God's repeated calling of his people to fight poverty, it took the Holy Spirit to empower people to actually do significant things to end it. Before Jesus, the world turned a blind eye, but Jesus makes us look and see. Before Jesus, the world had a fatalistic view, where it saw your situation as luck or fate and lifted not a finger to help. Before Jesus there was nothing like the Salvation Army, CBM or World Vision.

Before Jesus, there were no: food banks, clothing cupboards, Toy Mountains or foster parents' plans. Before Jesus there were few, if any: hospitals, clinics, food distributions or Habitats for Humanity. Before Jesus there was no hope and no future for millions of people. I am not naïve. I realize the overwhelming nature of the situation our world finds itself in, in regards to poverty.

But imagine what the situation would be like, with no Christian based organizations seeking to make a difference. Take away all the mission and aid groups that churches fund and you quickly see the negative impact this would have. Take away the volunteers who man food banks and shelters and see how hopeless things can be. Yes, there is much to do. There are a billion people in need of some good news, but the Holy Spirit has intervened.

I am reminded of a wonderful little story about a man who was walking along a beach one morning after the tide had gone out. All along the beach were hundreds of stranded starfish. Under the blazing sun they were all in danger of dying from dehydration. A bit further along the beach he happened upon a young boy picking up stranded starfish and throwing them back into the deeper water.

The man stopped and said to the boy, "Why do you bother. There are thousands of these starfish on this beach. What difference does it make, you throwing a few back into the

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water?” To which the young boy replied as he held one of the starfish, “It makes all the difference to this one”.

Every effort, big or small, makes a difference in the war on poverty. The good news is that Christ’s people are engaged and committed to the struggle.

That is a wonderful Christmas gift to this despairing world. Christ has, through the loving and sacrificial efforts of his followers, “satisfied the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty handed.” The only question today is, are we part of that good news and if not why aren’t we? If Christ is truly our Lord and Saviour and he lives in us, then his mission is our mission, and his love is our love.

As Bonhoeffer suggested, “Preach the Good New continually and if necessary, use words.” Let us commit to being good news to the poor as we seek to honour the one we claim to celebrate at this special time of year.