

Sunday December 22nd, 2019

Advent IV

PRAYER: Gracious Creator, you bring the world forth from your hand. Make your presence known to us, your children that we might drink deeply from the abundance of your glory. May we be newly born; may we grow to give light to those who dwell in the darkest of nights and who sit in the valley of the shadow of death. Amen.

STEWARDSHIP: The stage is now set for us to have Christ present his gift of life to us. We have been granted the grace to have been invited to participate in this grand drama of changing lives for the glory of God. As we offer our tithes and offerings let us step boldly onto the world's stage and offer to God what we bring in anticipation of the power our gifts have to transform lives.

PASTORAL PRAYER: Mighty Creator, we marvel at the works of your hands; they never cease to fill us with excitement and wonder. Gracious Redeemer, we thrill to your displays of patience; they kindle within us hope and confidence. Gracious Sustainer, we bow in awe before your unwavering support; even though we constantly let you down, you never fail to hold us up.

For all these mighty works we praise your name, O God. But we thank you most of all for the revelation of yourself in the One whose resting places were, first, a manger, and, finally, a cross. In him you brought low the proud and raised up the humble. In him you became truly human in order that we, through him, might become truly human.

He taught us well, yet our living has not always made the world more human. Our sympathies, unlike his, do not strengthen the weak. Our words, unlike his, do not condemn the proud. And our deeds, unlike his, do not honour the claims of justice.

We have not become a mirror of him as he became a mirror of you. For this betrayal –of him, of you, and of ourselves-we come before you with broken and contrite hearts. Forgive us, O God, and renew us, that the humanity that was born in Jesus might be reborn in us today.

Today as we celebrate when you joined the human race in Jesus, multitudes still sit in darkness and walk in the shadow of death. Millions are starving for want of food. Others are hungry for the bread of life. We pray, O Lord, that you will make us the channels of your blessing to the nations, whether they need the bread of earth or the bread of heaven.

Christ has come to bring peace on earth and good will to all its peoples. Let us proclaim this good news, today and tomorrow and forever, here and there and everywhere.

BENEDICTION: As an anxious mother and father await a tiny child's birth, so God yearns for us. And as the tired child cries for the parent away from home, so we yearn for god. May God's arms embrace you until you find your peace; may God's shoulder carry you until you find your rest; that you may shoulder those burdens that have never been touched and embrace the hearts that have never been held.

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Isaiah 2:1-5 and Luke 2:8-20

Series: God's Christmas Gifts.

Part IV: "Year of the Lord's Favour."

One of the surest things in life, at least in my experience, is that politicians are going to make promises. As former US President Ronald Reagan is quoted as saying after observing the Democratic Presidential primary in New Hampshire: "There were so many candidates on the platform that there were not enough promises to go around." Another quote on this subject I read said, "One candidate was so happy about winning, that he accidentally kept one of his promises."

I guess that is what really bothers me about politics. It is this whole idea that when public money is spent on a project labeled as a benefit to us; we are told by the spin doctors that the politicians are doing us a "favour". They use this reasoning, despite the fact, that the money being used to fund the promise is our money in the first place. It is our taxes that will fund: roads, sewers, transit, hydro rate reductions and every other so called favour.

It seems like everywhere I go these days; whenever anyone does something for me, they portray their actions as if it is a favour to me. Have you noticed this trend? For example; I pay hundreds of dollars to fix my car and the mechanic acts like he is doing me a favour. I go to a restaurant, purchase a meal, and the server acts like they are doing me a favour. In so much of my experience with the retail and service industries, spending my own money is treated like an act of grace by the retailer.

I mean to say, that the merchants, or service help think I am "lucky" to have them to take my money. First all let us set the record straight; a commercial exchange is not a favour. The fulfilling of a campaign promise, or doing the work of government is not a favour. Taking responsibility for your family is not doing a favour. Going to work every day, is not doing a favour for your employer. I think, in many ways, we have devalued the meaning of the word "favour".

To clarify; if there is any obligation at all, attached to any action, it is not a favour. If I pay to have someone do something for me; that includes an obligation for a service. If we elect a certain person for public office, on a certain platform; then when they carry out their promises that is not a favour. They were obligated to do these things. Will you agree with me that for a favour to be a favour; it must be free of obligations?

To be truly a favour, means that someone does something for you that they were not required or obligated to do. Actually, the very definition of favour is an act of grace. Grace, of course, meaning something we do not deserve. In our Advent series we have been looking at God's Christmas gifts to us, based on the passage from Luke 4:18-19 where Jesus applies Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah to himself.

Luke 4: 18-19 reads, *"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, for he has appointed me to preach Good News to the Poor."*

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He has sent me to proclaim that captives be released, that the blind will see, that the downtrodden will be freed from their oppressors, and that the time of the Lord's favour has come." Then Jesus adds in verse 21, *"This Scripture has come true today before your very eyes!"*

Did you notice in this passage the word favour? I also point out that in our Gospel lesson today, the angels' song includes similar words, with that key word "favour" included. The angels sang to the shepherds and the whole world, *"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and peace on earth to all whom God favours."* (Luke 2:14) So, if I read these verses correctly, it would appear that we have been promised "favour" from God.

The implication is that God is doing something for us that we did not earn, nor is God obligated to undertake such action. Furthermore, in the true nature of the meaning of favour, the true cost of the favour rests with the one granting the favour. A true favour cannot be bought, or forced out of the benefactor by blackmail. In this and all true transactions of favours, the one granting the favour has the skill, power, or resources to accomplish the favour. The recipient does not.

Another related concept in terms of God's favour is that of covenant. In the correct, biblical meaning of covenant, is the concept that two parties make an agreement to end hostilities. Almost always in a covenant, one king or ruler was more powerful than the other; and so, in an effort to avoid destroying the lesser party, a covenant was made. In a covenant ceremony promises were exchanged, gifts offered, and then the whole thing was sealed in blood. The gifts being given in a covenant, points to the Wisemen, I think.

In terms of the New Covenant in Christ, we are the lesser party. We are at the mercy of an all-powerful God. God could do as he pleased with us. He could have ignored us, punished us, or even as Noah found out, he could destroy us. Since God made us, we are his to do as he pleased. But God took an unusual step, and made a beautiful decision to extend us a favour or favourable time.

To show you how deep this favour of God is, I draw your attention to the passage in Isaiah that is the basis for Luke 4. There we read the same words but with a significant addition. (Isaiah 61:1-2)

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me, because the Lord has appointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to comfort the brokenhearted and to announce that captives will be released and prisoners freed. He has sent me to tell those who mourn that the time of the Lord's favour has come, and with it, the day of God's anger against their enemies.

Did you catch the significant addition to the words Jesus read? Isaiah includes, "the day of God's anger against their enemies." Why did Jesus not include these words? God certainly had every right to be angry at the sin of this world, so why did Jesus leave these words out? It all has to do with that favour that God extends to us. Something is different with Jesus than with Isaiah.

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There is an extra piece of the puzzle. Yes, judgment still exists, but grace or favour takes precedence.

How many of us remember scripture verses? Well, I bet that a good many of us know by heart at least one. John 3:16. The verse referenced at major sporting events on placards held up by fans, worn on T-shirts and taught to young children. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.” Most of you know this verse, but do you know John 3:17?

This verse reads, “God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it.” That’s the difference with Jesus. The great favour is that instead of condemning this world, Christ came to save it; came to save us from ourselves. Jesus came to save us from all the things that seek to ruin life; things like what we mentioned earlier in Advent. Things like poverty, captivity, grief, blindness or anything that adds to human sadness.

God could have left us to our own devices or vices; but instead God showed his love, by extending his favour or his grace, to all of us. We have, by the grace and mercy of Christ Jesus, become God’s “favoured” sons and daughters. God has shown how very fond he is of each one of us. And this time of favour, according to the angels, and confirmed by Christ in Luke 4, began with incarnation. Christ becoming flesh.

There is however another key word here that needs examination. We are told in Luke 4 that it is a “time” of the Lord’s favour. The word time here, indicates not a specific time frame, but rather that this is a limited time offer. The judgment Isaiah talked about, will eventually come. The time of God’s favour will run out. It behooves us to grab this grace and favour while we still can.

I don’t know if you have seen these cheesy commercials on television for the “Slap Chop” kitchen tool. The commercial has a very excitable man, moving with ridiculous speed, using his Slap Chop to dice up all kinds of vegetables and nuts. Then at the end of the commercial he makes an offer to sell the Slap Chop at what he claims is a very low price, but for a limited time only. In fact, he says, “We can’t do this all day.”

I find it odd that two weeks later, the very same commercial appears and he says the same thing. It seems to me, he can do it: all day, and all week, and even for months at a time. It doesn’t appear to me that the Slap Chop is very time limited at all. Well, the time of God’s favour coming to an end, is known only to God himself. However, the point is though, that an end is coming. This, limited time, is maybe why God undertook such a drastic measure to reach us with his message of salvation.

Namely, he did this, by sending his one and only Son to be a babe in a manger. Way back in the fourth century, there was a church father named Athanasius. Athanasius was a bishop of Alexandria. A great deal of Athanasius work and writing was directed at countering a heresy in the early church called Arianism. Arianism was a heresy built on denying the incarnation of Christ. Athanasius spoke of the incarnation this way.

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“The Lord disguised Himself by appearing in a body, that He might, as Man, transfer men to Himself, and center their senses on Himself.” (Incarnation pg. 115)

How beautiful a thought! The coming of a Christ as a baby, captures our attention, as babies are apt to do, and focuses our attention on the grace of God. The incarnation is God’s beckoning to our longing hearts. It is a longing to meet, and be touched by the holiness of God. It is a longing that the prophets, like Isaiah, gave voice to hundreds of years before Christ was born.

“O Come, O Come Emmanuel and ransom captive Israel.” The real issue, in my mind is that we don’t take this favour of God seriously enough. We maybe focus on it a bit this time of year, or at Easter, but the rest of the time we live our lives by works, and not by grace. We act as if we have earned our favour with God. I ran across something that Chuck Swindoll wrote about in his book *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart*.

According to a legend Satan and his demons were having a Christmas party. As the demonic guest were departing, one grinned and said to Satan, “Merry Christmas, your majesty.” At that, Satan replied with a growl, “Yes, keep it merry. If they ever get serious about it, we’ll all be in trouble.” Swindoll writes of this legend, “Well, get serious about it. It is the birth of the Baby. It is the coming of God. It is the intervention of God’s presence among men.”

The shepherds show us how to take this time of favour seriously. They dropped everything that until the angels appeared, seemed most important to them. “Let’s go see this wondrous thing that the Lord has made known to us.” God’s favour, God’s grace, demands a response. It calls us to bend our hearts and submit to the one who made a New Covenant with us.

Max Lucado in his book *The Applause of Heaven* makes an interesting observation.

A small cathedral outside Bethlehem marks the supposed birthplace of Jesus. Behind a high altar in the church is a cave, a little cavern lit by silver lamps. You can enter the main edifice and admire the ancient church. You can also enter the quiet cave where a star is embedded in the floor recognizes the birth of the King. There is one stipulation, however. You have to stoop. The door is so low you can’t go in standing up.

The same is true of Christ. You can see the world standing tall, but to witness the Saviour, you have to get on your knees. So, while the theologians were sleeping and the elite were dreaming and the successful were snoring, the meek were kneeling. They were kneeling before the One only the meek with see. They were kneeling in front of Jesus.

What more could God do to get your attention? How else would you want him to communicate that you are one of his favourites? How can we dare to ask for more from God when so much has already been given? But that is the nature of a God, who is determined to extend favour upon favour to us, people who deserve none of it. His great love knows no bounds and comes with no qualifiers.

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Imagine being Mary at the enunciation when Gabriel said, “Greetings favoured woman! The Lord is with you.” The birth of Christ is God’s way of saying, “Greetings favoured people! The Lord is with you.” The enduring hope, the longing heart and the overburdening need are all met in Jesus. As the Hymn writer Phillip Doddridge wrote...

Hark, the glad sound! The Saviour comes! The Saviour promised long! Let every heart prepare a throne, and every voice a song.

On Him the Spirit largely poured, exerts its sacred fire; Wisdom and might and zeal and love, His holy breast inspire.

He comes the prisoner to release, In Satan’s bondage held; the gates of brass before him burst, the iron fetters yield.

He comes the broken heart to bind, the bleeding soul to cure, And with the treasures of His grace T’enrich the humble poor.

His silver trumpets publish loud, the jubilee of the Lord; our debts are all remitted now, our heritage restored.

Our glad hosannas, Prince of Peace, Thy welcome shall proclaim; and heaven’s eternal arches ring with thy beloved name.

Hark, the Glad Sound! Indeed! Can you hear the angel’s sound echoing through the years? Calling us to rush to the one whose favour has been freely given. Come let us bow before him. Let us pray.