

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual nourishment; A River of service in Jesus' Name

Christmas Eve/December 24, 2009

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A 21 year old woman¹ named Dorothy was kneeling in a pew in the back of a church and collecting her thoughts. She longs for an end to the wavering life in which she feels caught. It is hard to describe, but she feels hounded toward God as though toward home. For the time being she begins to pray. "What am I here for, what am I doing, what does my life mean?" Like Mary she ponders these things in her heart.

God's message comes to Mary through shepherds, those who are lowly, brushed off and busy. Mary ponders in her heart what she has been told. She is puzzling out its meaning, tossing things together until they begin to make sense, figuring out the way forward.

Four years later the same woman Dorothy has begun to pray daily, nothing complex just an awareness of God's closeness. She discovers that she is praying because she is happy. She is not using prayer to grab God's attention and demand something from God (though there is plenty of precedent for that). Instead, God has already (before she even knew it) sought her out. So she is turning to God in thanksgiving because the goodness and loving kindness of Christ have appeared to her. Later on after pondering she reflected back and realized that she had known times "of intense joy, but seldom had there been the quiet beauty and happiness" she had now. She had begun to go to church, not out of a sense of obligation or even duty, but because she wanted to share that feeling of joy with others. She had been sought out, sought after, by God.

"I have posted sentinels, who remind the LORD," sings our passage from Isaiah. And in response the LORD proclaims, you "shall be called, 'The Holy People'... 'and you shall be called, Sought Out.'" We pray, "Do this in remembrance of me," reminding God of God's merciful promises. God's answer is to seek us out.

God seeks us out with goodness and loving kindness, says the passage from Titus. God seeks us out as holy people, experiencing goodness and loving kindness in the birth of Jesus. “And this shall be a sign unto you,” says the angel to shepherds. “Ye shall find the babe... lying in a manger.” And like the angels we will praise God for this peace, good will and loving kindness. We are sought out, sought after, by God.

This is what is known as redemption. The unredeemed power of Caesar Augustus can push around the poor of his time yet we can watch through the lens of history as the Empire is drained of meaning and purpose. It needs redemption, to be freed from this emptiness. When we are all caught up in self-importance, reveling in a tissue thin show of success, and begin to wonder if this is all there is, God seeks us out to save us. “Ye shall find the babe... lying in a manger.” We are touched by goodness and loving kindness. Redemption.

When we raise ourselves up by putting others down, we tie ourselves up in knots. We need to loose the bonds. That too, is redemption. Sometimes even religious hope can be a judgmental dismissal of others. The expectation of a Davidic messiah in Jesus’ time was of one who could put down Rome and restore Israel. This lifting up of one by putting down another is in stark contrast to the birth of Jesus who is born among the lowly. And so we are free from having to catch God’s attention by clawing our way past others. God already has us in sight. “His eye is on the sparrow,” as the old hymn goes, “and I know he watches me.” This is redemption.

God’s merciful promises are present and at the same time not yet fulfilled. We are knotted up and need freedom, and, truth to tell, sometimes a sorry bunch that needs joy. God seeks us out, each one of us, and pours out holy Spirit on us richly. In the Christmas story God seeks out the townspeople and travelers who have no room for the expectant family. When we are preoccupied and worries crowd out any room for Christ, God seeks us out. God is with those who have no place to lay their heads, who are uprooted and dislocated by politics as were Mary and Joseph. Christ is born among them. God seeks us out when we are low. The angels come to shepherds at the very low end of the social scale. God comes to those who are dismissed or put down by others. Shepherds were brushed off as dishonorable because they were away from their families and unable to protect them. God seeks all those out. God’s Spirit is poured out on those busy with other things. The shepherds were focused on “keeping watch over their flock by night,” when the angel came upon them. When we are over-busied God seeks us out.

To be sought out is to be redeemed. Worship is our reminder to God of God's mercies. God's answer is to seek us out with such goodness and loving kindness that we are inspired to worship. The pattern is circular. God seeks us out. And under the impact of having been sought out, we remind God of what that day meant long ago when a baby was gently placed upon the straw of a manger. We feel like we are coming home. We might be a twenty-something kneeling in a pew at the back of a church wondering "what am I supposed to do with my life?" To us a Savior has been born. We might be all wrapped up in our self-importance so that we can't see past it, and wonder if this is all there is? To us a Savior has been born. We might think we have to claw our way past another to be something in God's eyes, but God has already noted us. "His eye is on the sparrow." To us a Savior has been born. God seeks out each one of us, no matter whether we are preoccupied, uprooted, low down or brushed off. To us a Savior has been born, and the possibility of redemption realized. We have known moments of joy but now there is this deep-seated, quiet beauty and happiness within. God has sought us out. Goodness and loving kindness have come to us. Christ our Savior is born. And it's Christmas.

Amen.

1. The story of the woman is the story of Dorothy Day as recounted in: Elie, Paul, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003.