

December 21, 2008

4th Sunday of Advent

Lessons

RCL	2 Sam 7:1-11, 16	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38
Roman Catholic	2 Sam 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38
Episcopal (BCP)	2 Sam 7:4, 8-16	Rom 16:25-27	Lk 1:26-38

Speaker's Introduction for the Lessons

Lesson 1

- **2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 (RCL); 7:1-5, 8b-12, 14a, 16 (RC); 7:4, 8-16 (Epis):** Reading God's promise to give David a dynasty on this Sunday, we immediately think of Jesus, born in "David's town" of Bethlehem. The image of David the shepherd king reminds us that Jesus, too, will redefine what it means to be a leader.

Lesson 2

- **Romans 16:25-27 (RCL/RC/Epis):** These final verses from Paul's letter to the Romans offer a simple benediction and yet, woven within is a brief history of God's relationship with humankind, reminding us that the life of Jesus is a part of God's overall plan.

Gospel

- **Luke 1:26-38 (RCL/RC/Epis):** Mary is probably about the age of 12 or 13 when visited by an angel. Gabriel's announcement changes not only Mary's life, but the whole world.

Theme

Preparing for Christmas means preparing for life *after* Christmas.

Thought for the Day

If we put the celebration of Christ's birth away with the decorations, what is the point of Christmas? Let us strive to live lives transformed by Jesus whose birth we celebrate.

Sermon Summary

Paul's final verses to the Romans speak of what God has done for us, and tell us that Jesus has come to bring about an "obedience of faith." How will we live in response to the gift of Jesus Christ? How will we continue to celebrate Christmas?

Call to Worship

One: Joy to the world, for Christ has come.

All: Let earth receive the shepherd king.

One: Joy to the world, the Savior reigns.

All: Let every heart prepare a room.

One: Joy to the world – Christ comes to transform our living.

All: Let heaven and nature sing!

One: Come, let us worship God.

Pastoral Prayer

Advent God, the time of waiting is almost over, and we are about to celebrate once again the birth of the Christ. Through the noise and busyness of this season, help us to hear the message of Mary, and join with her in proclaiming a new era of justice and liberation. Help us to hear the angels' declaration of peace on earth and goodwill to all people, and empower us to be peacemakers. Enliven us to be agents of good will, especially reaching out to those who may find themselves in extra pain of body, mind, or spirit in this holy season of deep joy. All these things we ask in the name of Jesus the Christ, the descendant of David and child of Mary. Amen.

Prayer of Confession

Leader: When we get tired and anxious and overwhelmed by Christmas preparations,

People: Forgive us, God, and help us to refocus.

Leader: When we lose sight of the purpose of Advent and Christmas,

People: Forgive us, God, and help us to refocus.

Leader: When we resist the change and transformation that Jesus Christ brings to our lives,

People: Forgive us, God, and help us to refocus.

Leader: When we are tempted to put Christmas away with the decorations,

People: Forgive us, God, and help us to refocus. Amen.

Prayer of Dedication of Gifts and Self

Ever-giving God, in this season of sharing, we offer ourselves to you. As you gave the wondrous gift of your child Jesus to teach us, lead us, guide us, and renew our lives, use our gifts of wealth, self, and service to help bring about your reign on earth. Amen.

Hymn of the Day

“Gloria, Gloria” (CH; PH; SNC; UMH; VU; WR)

This short response is one of the better known pieces from the community of Taizé. The text is traditional with music composed by Jacques Berthier. While it may be easiest to sing in English, encourage your congregation to sing the original Latin. It is a well-known Christmas text and sings with better word stress. It is a canon. Once you have taught it to the people, help them to sing it as a round. Placing members of your choir within the congregation will help this process. Sing it as a processional, a response to the reading, a response to prayer, or a concluding benediction. Sing it with energy and great conviction.

Children’s Time

Giving Gifts

Bring the decorated Christmas tree and lights from December 7 and 14. Bring several small wrapped gifts to place under the tree. Bring a box that has lots of little Christmas cookies to share too. Wrap a crèche scene to be opened on Christmas.

“How many lights are burning on the Advent wreath? This is the fourth Sunday in Advent. Christmas will be here very soon. Do you notice

anything new about our little Christmas tree? Yes, we have gifts under the tree. What do you want for Christmas? Do you have gifts for your family and friends? What will you give them? I have a gift for each one of you. (*Give each child a Christmas cookie.*) Making Christmas cookies is one way we can get ready for Christmas. Making Christmas cookies and giving them as gifts is another way to get ready for Christmas. Why do you think we give each other gifts? We give gifts on Christmas to remind us of God's greatest gift to the world – God's son, Jesus."

Close by singing a favorite Christmas carol.

The Sermon

And So This Is Christmas

Scripture: Romans 16:25-27

(For sermon materials on Luke 1:26-38, see the September 2008 issue of *The Clergy Journal*; for sermon materials on Luke 1:47-55, see the 2008 May/June planning issue of *The Clergy Journal*.)

A generation ago, John Lennon and Yoko Ono sang a brilliant rhetorical question:

And so this is Christmas;
and what have you done?

Another year older,
a new one just begun. ("Happy Christmas/War Is Over")

How might we answer? What *have* we done? What are we planning to do, once Christmas Day is behind us?

All the wonderful preparation – the buying and wrapping, the cooking and baking, the decorating, the partying – these things are fantastic. But where are they leading us? If just to a day of celebration, it's all a bit hollow.

In amongst all of the traditional stories that we know and love so well, hiding somewhere amongst the tinsel or the straw in the manger, we find Romans 16:25-27.

These final verses of Paul's letter to the church at Rome form a closing benediction, and they hardly seem at first glance like a Christmas text. However, they have much to teach us about how we might start to act on December 26 and beyond. Because if by next Sunday Christmas has

become a memory, safely packed away for another year, then we are not really celebrating Christmas at all, but simply paying it lip service.

Sandwiched in between the words “Now to God who is able to strengthen you...be the glory forever” Paul gives a very brief explanation of the reason for Christ’s birth. Jesus has come to reveal the mystery of God in an exciting new way. This way is for all nations and will (hopefully) bring about the “obedience of faith.” Put it another way, Jesus has come so that everyone can know God, and respond accordingly.

There is a point to Christmas that goes far beyond a day or even a season, and which does nothing less than transform the world completely and forever. It is what Mary proclaims in the bold and prophetic verses of the Magnificat: God has done great things, and God’s mercy is on all, from generation to generation. Why? Because justice and mercy are God’s very nature. And because God promised.

As we think about Christmas, our minds undoubtedly go to the subject of gifts and gift-giving. By now you may be at that point of having bought and wrapped everything, and you may be thinking “I’ve overdone it again.” Or maybe you’re wondering if you have gotten just the right gift for someone. Maybe you have yet to finish your shopping, and you’re in a bit of a panic.

Without putting additional pressure on this whole gift-giving thing, there’s one more present that we need to think about. What gift will you give to God *after* Christmas?

If we are going to celebrate God’s gift of new life that came in the amazing package of Jesus the Christ, we ought to give God something in return. As we celebrate the grace of God that comes to each and every one of us as a free gift, no strings attached, how might we show our gratitude?

Paul reminds us that Jesus came to challenge us to live out our faith in response to what God has done.

We seem to understand that well throughout the Advent season, throughout the time of preparation. Amidst the biggest spending frenzy of the year, people still find it in their hearts and their wallets to give to charities. Food banks can stock their shelves, Salvation Army kettles fill with coins and paper money, and churches collect socks and mittens and coats for those who are homeless.

Something else happens at this time of year that is pretty unique as well. This is perhaps the only time of year when Christians unabashedly sing hymns in public. Think of it – we hear familiar carols on the radio, in shopping malls, and in concerts, and we sing along. Even if we do not

consider ourselves singers at the rest of the year, at Christmas we dare to raise our voices in all sorts of places.

But what is the nature of our giving for the next 11 months? How eager are we to proclaim our faith, in song or spoken word, until the cycle starts again?

One homeless shelter held a Christmas campaign in the month of January. It got a lot of press, and some curious questions: "Why now? Did you miss the boat? Are you starting next year early?" To which came the reply, "We are inviting you to respond to Christmas. We are providing you with an opportunity to keep the spirit of Christmas alive and not hidden." Sadly, the response was pretty dismal – it seems that people had finished celebrating the birth of Christ.

Many people speak of the January "blahs" and of a sense of letdown after Christmas. The term "blue Monday" was first coined as a label for the last Monday in January because, for those in the northern hemisphere, that was traditionally the time of year when people hit the deepest depression due to dark and cold winter weather.

Yet this comes barely a month after Christians have so boldly proclaimed the arrival of the light of the world. Something's wrong with this picture.

As a child I thought it strange to say "Merry Christmas" once December 25 had arrived; some people even used the greeting up until New Year's.

Now, I've come to appreciate this custom, and to encourage it, even to wish it continued for weeks and weeks and weeks. The season of celebrating God's gift, and responding to it, is just beginning.

Dare to keep that tree up as long as you can!

Keep playing your Christmas CDs, and sing along with them!

Most of all, keep thinking of ways that you can give of yourself to others, as a way of giving back to God.

A century before John and Yoko, English poet Christina Rossetti offered these words:

What can I offer, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb.

If I were a wise one, I would do my part.

Yet what I can I give him: give my heart.

May we do the same this Christmas and beyond, and thus enact what Paul called the obedience of faith, and thus glorify God forever.

Merry Christmas.

– Donald Schmidt

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Hymns

Opening Hymn:

“Hail to God’s Own (the Lord’s) Anointed”

“My Soul Gives Glory to My God”

Sermon Hymn:

“In the Bleak Midwinter,” “When God Is a Child”

Closing Hymn:

“I Am the Light of the World,” “All Earth Is Hopeful (*Toda la Tierra*)”