

Fourth Sunday of Advent

12/24/2023

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

It is all an unlikely story. Abraham was promised that he would be the father of a great nation and that all the world would be blessed through him. Years of anticipation passed only to be met with disappointment after disappointment. Abraham and Sarah, now well advanced in years, heard the divine promise, “Next year, Sarah your wife, will have a son.”¹ Though the laughter of disbelief crept into Sarah’s mind, years of disappointment would be met with the laughter of joy when Isaac, whose very name means laughter, was born to Abraham and Sarah. From that unlikely couple, an unlikely nation was produced, which produced an unlikely dynasty², which would produce an unlikely Messiah, who would be a blessing to the nations in unanticipated ways.

Abraham was an unlikely father; Israel is an unlikely nation; and David was an unlikely king. As unlikely as David was, he became the prototype of the ideal king to the people of Israel. A shepherd from the fields engaged in a bold confrontation with one of the most fearsome warriors recorded in antiquity. David would not back down from Goliath, though the armies of Israel were cowering in fear. David was a courageous warrior. He was also resourceful. When brought before the king of Gath, David feigned insanity and was allowed to go free. David was passionate. He is described as dancing before the Lord with all his might, and shouting to the Lord along with the sound of trumpets. David was a good friend to Jonathan, who was Saul’s son. Despite the obstinacy of King Saul, David remained loyal to Jonathan. Upon Jonathan’s death, David lamented, I grieve for you, Jonathan my brother; you were very dear to me. Your love for me was wonderful, more wonderful than that of a woman.”³ Lastly, David was the prototype king because he repented when he was confronted by Nathan, the Prophet, after committing adultery with Bathsheba.

David’s love for God prompted a desire to build a sacred Temple to the Lord. And though David was devoted to God, though God would call David “A man after my own heart,”⁴ David was not the king to build the Temple. God revealed to David, “You have shed much blood and have fought many wars. You are not to build a house in my name because you have shed much blood on the earth in my sight.”⁵ The anointed one who would be called by God to build the Temple would be a man of peace and rest.⁶ The king of peace and rest is Solomon, the child born to David and Bathsheba. Solomon was the royal heir, yet he had scandalous origins in the illicit union of David and Bathsheba. Such circumstances seem unlikely to produce the heir to the throne of God’s holy people, yet it is true.

¹ Genesis 18:10.

² The unlikely dynasty refers to King David and his heirs.

³ 2 Samuel 1:26.

⁴ Acts 13:22.

⁵ 1 Chronicles 22:8.

⁶ 1 Chronicles 22:9.

After the death of Solomon, things didn't go very well in the kingdom. Infidelity to God became the order of the day. The Northern tribes split from the Southern tribes, the divided kingdoms were subsequently conquered, and for centuries vacillated between mild and severe oppression – ethnic cleansing, religious suppression, the destruction of the Temple Solomon built, and exile in foreign lands. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Persians, the Greeks, the Ptolemies, the Seleucids, and the Romans all took subsequent turns. The only respite from foreign occupation was the century of the Hasmonean Dynasty after the Maccabean Revolt. Even then, Seleucid and Roman power were never far away. No wonder the people of Israel were looking for someone of their own to rule over them.

For centuries, no king in Israel or Judea came close to meeting messianic expectations. Under Roman rule, Herod the Great was allowed to operate as a vassal king. He was Idumean, which means he was not fully Jewish, and he was far from an ideal king. His heirs were political opportunists, not exactly men of peace and rest, like Solomon. No one of prominence would meet messianic expectations, which just might be exactly when one could expect to find the messianic king.

Saul was king over Israel, and he was described as a head taller than everyone else. What more could you ask for in a king? Yet when Saul's armies were confronted by the Philistines, actually when confronted by the singular Philistine, Goliath, Saul and his men were dismayed and terrified.⁷ David, the youngest of Jesse's sons, wasn't even a warrior. He was just a shepherd. Yet he questioned who Goliath was to challenge the armies of the living God.⁸ David was also a young man, which caused Saul and his armies to doubt that David could overcome Goliath. God had said to Samuel, "The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at outward appearances, but the Lord looks at the heart."⁹ We shouldn't expect God to follow man's rules or expectations.

What are man's rules? According to the spirit of the age, our rules are confirmation, reinforcement, and affirmation. There is nothing wrong with any of this unless it is supportive of ignorance, egoism, and a rebellion against reality. And while it would be easy enough to point to the ways in which society is guilty of this misguided support, what is more pressing is that we understand how we are going along with it. Society would like to confirm you in your sin with a consumerist bent which ignores the cries of the needy. Society seeks to reinforce your ignorance by steering you toward vain entertainment and propagandistic media which serves to boost your ego, making you feel certain that no other viewpoint is worth hearing. Society seeks to affirm you in your ignorance by convincing you that the shadows projected on your screens are reality. You have readily passed your time in the den of temptation. But as Oscar Wilde said, "The only thing I can't resist is temptation." And rather than taking hold of what is real, that which is found in Christ, you are content to remain ignorant of God's Holy Word.

Sometimes, discomfort is a sign of God's work. It may be comfortable to remain confirmed and affirmed in ignorance and egoism, but little growth is to be gained there.

⁷ 1 Samuel 17:11.

⁸ 1 Samuel 17:26.

⁹ 1 Samuel 16:7.

Discomfort may be a sign that God is disciplining you. The discomfort we experience over the spirit of the age ought to draw us toward the things of God. We should not despise this time, “because the Lord disciplines those he loves as a father the son he delights in.”¹⁰

“No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.”¹¹ Consider this current age as an opportunity to confirm yourself in the knowledge of Christ, to reinforce humility over and against arrogance, and to affirm the reality of Christ’s light instead of being drawn into the shadowy illusions of the cave.

What is very real are the prophecies about the Messiah, and the young couple whose world would soon be turned upside down. Joseph and Mary were everything ordinary. Joseph was from Bethlehem and from the household of David. Neither of these are extraordinary in and of themselves. Combined, the pieces start to come together. Micah prophesied, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”¹² From this verse, some speculated the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. Another messianic expectation can be gleaned from Isaiah who said, “In love a throne will be established; in faithfulness a man will sit on it – one from the House of David, – one who in judging seeks justice and speeds the cause of righteousness.”¹³

Isaiah prophesied, “the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”¹⁴ Bethlehem, check. House of David, check. Then the angel said to her, “You will be with child and give birth to a son...”¹⁵ “How will this be since I am a virgin?” Pregnant virgin? Check! An unlikely fountainhead for the Messiah and the restoration of Israel and enlightening the Gentiles? You betcha!

The Holy Spirit overshadowed Mary, and the Messiah was conceived in her womb. “In Christ, the reality of God encounters the reality of the world and allows us to take part in this real encounter. Christian life is participation in Christ’s encounter with the world.”¹⁶ Humanity, lost in its illusions of life encounters the very source of eternal life. In the incarnation, “eternal life breaks ever more powerfully into earthly life and creates space for itself within it.”¹⁷ Christ’s becoming man is the greatest confirmation, reinforcement, and affirmation of the worth of man. Unworthy though we are, “God demonstrates His love for us in this; while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”¹⁸

Christ’s redemption of the world is about more than an infant child. It is about the Lord of all creation being brought into creation in humility and under a cloud of scandal. Solomon was born from a scandalous union, and observant people probably knew it. Yet he was the man of

¹⁰ Proverbs 5:11-12.

¹¹ Hebrews 12:11.

¹² Micah 5:2.

¹³ Isaiah 16:5.

¹⁴ Isaiah 7:14.

¹⁵ Luke 1:31.

¹⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 93.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Romans 5:8.

peace and rest who built the Temple of God in Israel. Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, like Solomon, is the unlikely One, born into suspicion. Yet Christ would build a Temple of His own, the very bride, His Church, which He gave up all to save. Now, we are His unlikely people, the unlikely sons of Abraham, heirs by adoption, not by birth.

Christ is our ideal King. A gentle shepherd who would slay death courageously by His own dying. A resourceful teacher who answered wisely when others sought to trap Him. A passionate defender of the exploited, filled with zeal for His Father's house. The dearest friend we could ask for, one that laid down His life for us. Yet, unlike David, Jesus was perfectly ideal, for He had no sin to repent of. As we near the end of this Advent season, as we prepare for His return to us, let us first return to Him. Let us cling to the way, the truth, and the life – the reality which we take hold of in faith. That reality sits upon the Messianic throne, even while in the virgin's womb.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.