

# Heirs of the Promise

sermon digest

Christmas 2, January 3, 2010

Galatians 3:27-4:7

carolyn dipboye

Fittingly, the church does not close out Christmas with the completion of the Christmas sales or television's Christmas specials. For us, the weeks of Advent begin the Christian year and the weeks of Christmas cross into the new calendar year, reminding us that the hope, peace, joy and love that we have been rehearsing during these weeks is the beginning point from which we live, not a seasonal pastime that we put away with the ribbons and tinsel. The Grace Chorale's sharing with us this morning the Advent and Christmas music that has blessed us this year has been an appropriate and meaningful way to greet the year ahead of us.

In our household we live every week with the words of worship ringing in our ears. We search them out, adapt or create them, and rehearse them to the point that they become a part of us, calling us to thanksgiving and worship before we even get to Sunday. During Advent and Christmas, that is especially the case. The words and the songs are fully in touch with the suffering and need of our world and lives and yet, so given to calling us aside to hope again. Gathering the words of worship becomes for us a special preparation for the rebirth of Christ within us personally and among us as a congregation.

Hear again this morning's words of worship:

"In the beginning, you, O God, just you; the Source and End of all that is. You are the Mystery we cannot penetrate, the Power we cannot manipulate, the Love we cannot measure. . . God of Mystery, Love and Power, you were and are and ever shall be, life and love and joy without end!" [Bruce Prewer, *Liturgies Year C*].

"God of God . . . Only the sound of an infant, crying in the night, a familiar, homely, human sound . . . . Light of light . . . . Very God of very God . . . . God is with us . . . terribly, simply with us." [Chandran Devanesen, *India*].

"For Unto Us a Child Is Born. . . ." "On this day Hope is born, not where life is safe, but where life is wounded; not where life is sterile, but where life is soiled; not where life comes easy, but where life is difficult and hard fought. A baby is born; and with him, hope . . . joy. . . peace" [Cole/Tilson, *Litanies & Prayers, A-24*].

This morning as we conclude our effort to view the birth of Jesus through the eyes of his family, the words we have shared in worship remind us of the wounded world into which Jesus was and is born—"not where life is sterile, but where life is soiled; not where life comes easy, but where life is difficult and hard fought." The sentimentality which tempts us at Christmas is out of step with the story that was first told and the story that is lived out in every generation. As the Gospel of Luke recounts the story, it is a story of hardship, of displacement and even abandonment. Why, in a culture that prized hospitality, would Luke have depicted Jesus born in a stable? Why, in a culture where family readily opened its doors to family, could Joseph, who "was descended from the house and family of David," find no welcome in Bethlehem, the place of his family heritage? Could it be that the family sought to protect itself against the scandal associated with this young couple? Families, we know, are not always what they ought to be. Perhaps Jesus' later prediction that "'son will turn against father, daughter against mother-in-law" reflected his and Mary and Joseph's own experience of abandonment at the hands of their extended family.

Perhaps Jesus' minimization of the significance of the birth family in the kingdom of God spoke of his own family's sense of having been cast aside by family. But more, perhaps it also speaks to Jesus' identification with all of those who feel shut out by polite society. At the moment of Jesus' birth, Winnie Varghese reminds us,

the Holy Family is alone. They are poor and vulnerable, sleeping among animals in a house for travelers. Like those displaced by Hurricane Katrina, [the] tsunami, the earthquakes in Pakistan and India, or any of the disasters of nature and war we see in the news, Mary, Joseph, and little Jesus are in this moment left alone, needy, wondering how they can build a new life together or even whether that will be possible ["A Family Cast Out and Taken In," *The Witness*, D 26, 2005].

The definition of family, given Jesus' own experience and the need of those to whom he came, thus changed: "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." Paul would later put it this way:

As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to

the promise. . . When the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God. (Galatians 3:27-29; 4:4-5, 7)

The world into which Jesus came had and has its serious divisions: circumcised and uncircumcised; Jew and Gentile; slave and free; male and female; rich and poor; citizen and immigrant; legal and illegal; respectable and unrespectable; employed and unemployed; educated and illiterate; Christian and Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic. Jesus, Luke and Paul are saying, removed the walls of division and welcomed us all into God's family. In Jesus, the walls that once mattered have all come down, making us all family, one to another.

In his diary from Genesee Abbey, Henri Nouwen described a Nativity set under the altar that had "three small, featureless wooden figures representing the holy family. Although smaller than a human hand, a bright light shining upon them projected their large shadows upon the wall of the sanctuary." Without the beam of light, Nouwen suspected he would probably have never noticed them. "I might just pass by these three simple people and continue to walk in darkness. But everything changes with the light" (Quoted in *New Proclamation 2000*).

And so it does. In the light of Christ's coming, we see ourselves and one another in a new way. The superficial and despicable ways in which we denigrate the value of ourselves or others recede into the darkness as we move into the light to be embraced by and to embrace the whole family of God.

Go now into the new year to live out of that transforming, hope-filled reality. Go as the recognizable children of God, leveling walls of division and bearing the sheer grace of the one who has claimed us all as beloved family.