

Christmas Sermon 2009
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At the heart of Christmas is love, peace, hope and joy. Yet for many folks, those wonderful qualities may seem elusive this year. As I pay attention to our Prayer Chain; as I listen to the concerns people share with me on Sunday mornings and through the week; as I scan the newspaper, emails and Facebook; as I reflect on experiences of Christmases past; as I feel the stress so many go through to make Christmas “happen” the way it “should” - I am acutely aware of much in the way of worry, fear, heartache and pain that lies in this and every Christmas.

This past weekend I learned of two sad deaths: of a young woman of 40 who died of complications of a pregnancy, and of a beloved member of this church who died early Sunday morning after a long and determined battle with cancer. On my list of prayer concerns are folks who are out of work; marriages where there is tension and strife; sailors and soldiers who are deployed overseas; people who are alone this year; as well as those dealing with chronic illness and disease.

Christmas gatherings, while a source of reconnection and joy for many, are also a time of bringing together family members who have issues with one another, of reminding us of those who are missing and gone from our lives, of hopes and aspirations that have not been met.

And yet, we are here this evening expectantly hoping to receive some measure of peace and reassurance as we worship together. Please know that if you are bearing a burden tonight, many of us here in this room have carried similar concerns ourselves, and you are in our hearts and prayers. As we come to the conclusion of our service and we sing Silent Night together, I pray that you will feel some of the weight on your shoulders lifted and that you will be carried forth into Christmas Day with an inner peacefulness and calm.

Here's why.....Many centuries ago on a night not much different from tonight, ordinary people not much different from ourselves, were weighed down by worries and fears not much different from our own. On that special night long ago in the town of Bethlehem, the Lord God almighty entered fully into the human experience in the person of a little child in an act of love that reverberates still to this day. It's an act of love that matters deeply, especially when we allow our cares and fears to get the upper hand. Jesus came into the world to get us back on track; to reassure each and every one of us that we are loved deeply by God; that every single one of us matters; that we are a blessing in God's eyes.

The story of Jesus' birth, and what followed in his life, death and Resurrection gives me assurance over and over again that no burden is so heavy, no worry so acute, that the trials and tribulations of the present moment cannot be healed, overcome and made well in this world or the next.

Let me take you briefly back to the opening chapters of the Bible in Genesis 1 and 2. Here we have two very different accounts about the origin of all things: the Creation of the world in 7 days and the story of Adam and Eve in the Garden. Both are so well woven together that we often think of them as a seamless whole. But taken separately, each has a different emphasis and theology. The story of the Garden of Eden deals upfront with the reality of Sin and Fallen-ness in the world. God created a perfect world and placed Adam and Eve in the midst of it. But these folks screwed it up, and we bear the consequences of their disobedience. Out of this theology comes the concept of Original Sin - our imperfection as human beings, and our need for God to

send his Son to save us from ourselves. An over-focus on Original Sin is the stuff of sermons that shame and blame us for being no-good, very bad sinners.

The other story about creation is different. It's the familiar story of God creating the world in 7 days. The key to this story is what God does after each creative day. He pauses, surveys his handiwork, and blesses it as good. The bottom line is this: God doesn't create junk. Everything he creates, has created, and will create is "Good". This is the concept of "Original Blessing."

So in these two stories we have two quite different concepts: Original Sin vs. Original Blessing. Man's depravity vs. God's blessing. In Jesus' day, those very pious individuals, the Pharisees and Sadducees, were fixated on Original Sin with its focus on Man's depravity. A whole body of laws and prohibitions were put in place to control, and preserve us from God's wrath, wicked folks that we are. This theology still preaches quite nicely in many pulpits in our own day.

But what if, as I deeply believe, Jesus was operating solely out of the concept of Original Blessing? God doesn't create junk. Everything God creates is good and blessed by Him. Jesus embodied this in his life. His time was spent not with the seemingly "nice" folks of his day, but with those weighed down with shame and scorn; with those whom society had thrown on the scrap heap. Jesus touched lepers whom every one else shunned. He consorted with tax-collectors and sinners whom everyone else viewed as unworthy of his attention. He called uneducated, rough and tumble fishermen into his inner circle. Jesus reminded people who long ago had given up on themselves that they were loved and blessed by God. A simple message really, but one clouded and obscured by the fear, distrust and suspicion engendered by the concept of Original Sin.

If we embrace this concept of "Original Blessing" it means that when you were created, God blessed you as good. And not just you, but God blessed every living person. No exceptions. Our ministry and mission then is to find and embrace the good that God has created in every human being, which is often obscured by wounds, anger, mistrust and abuse. But that goodness is present nonetheless. So at this Christmastide I invite you to look beyond the "issues" you may have with family members to the person within who is loved and blessed by God. I invite you to a deep level of trust, that beyond your cares, concerns, fears, and worries lies a God who loves you deeply and intimately. You are a blessing. Thanks be to God.