

SERMON
 First Lutheran Church
 Aitkin, Minnesota
 December 16, 2012
 Advent 3

Luke 3:7-18
 Isaiah 12:2-6
 Zephaniah 3:14-20
 Philippians 4:4-7
 Rev. Darrell J. Pedersen

CHILDREN'S MESSAGE – Global Barnyard Gifts – **Goats**

ADULT MESSAGE

Here are the headlines from one page of the Brainerd Dispatch this past Wednesday, December 12, 2012:

- Man shoots granddaughter, mistaken for intruder.
- Dayton authorizes shelter for stranded motorists.
- 34 years for man convicted of killing girlfriend.
- About 180 pigs killed in barn fire in southern Minnesota.
- 3rd death blamed on Minnesota storm.

And you know yourself that 25 little, elementary students were gunned down in a small town in New Jersey on Friday.

It will be hard for some of these folks to find comfort in a white Christmas, silver bells and a turkey dinner.

Two thousand years ago in Bethlehem, Israel the headlines may have read like this:

- 20 killed as tower collapses in Siloam.
- Tax hikes announced by Roman tax collectors.
- Temple police remove beggars from steps of Judaism's most holy shrine.
- Two local men arrested for terroristic attacks on Roman occupying army.
- Deadly drought continues in Sinai Peninsula.

It would have been hard for some of those ancient folks to celebrate Christmas back then too. For that matter, they probably didn't even know that Christmas had happened... They didn't even know that Jesus had come.

My cousin Dan committed suicide last week. His funeral was on Monday. It will be hard for his brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, friends and neighbors to have a joyous Christmas too...

Catch this. All of the folks in our scripture lessons for today were living in a dark and limping world. All of the folks in our lessons were looking forward to something better... Try as they might, they couldn't conjure up a perfect world, or even close... Some of them, in each and every age, looked forward to God's rescue, to God doing a new thing among them. They **hung onto hope**, or better, **hope hung onto them**.

People came by the droves to see John the Baptist in the wilderness by the Jordan River. He called them a **brood of vipers**. He warned of God's **judgment** that was coming upon their world. "**What then should we do?**" the people asked. John went on to tell the

- **People** – share your clothes and food with those who have less.
- **Tax collectors** – don't charge more than the law requires.
- **Soldiers** – don't extort money by threatening people.

And the people thought that maybe John was the Messiah. No, John said, "**I baptize you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.**"

Our gospel text concludes with this comment from Luke, "**So, with many other exhortations, (John the Baptist) proclaimed the good news to the people.**" I missed the good news... John is threatening that the Messiah will come to make things right and that heads will roll, that souls will burn... Is the good news that we **have to be good in order to be saved?**

No, the good news is that **Jesus comes into their world**, our world, where

- Many things are screwed up.
- Many priorities are wrong.
- People are hungry, homeless and hopeless (even though they might have plenty of money...)

The good news is that **Jesus comes to bring God's peace and even joy** to a world where Christmas is not always peaceful and joyous. Jesus

comes to bring hope to a dark and hurting world where everything is not always Hallmark nice.

The good news is all about **Jesus coming to save us despite our poor response**. The good news is about **God's will to bring about justice for every person**. The good news is about **Jesus inviting each and every person to come to him for forgiveness, healing and a fresh start in life** – again and again and again.

John expected **judgment, justice and punishment**. Jesus brought **forgiveness, justice and love**.

I grew up listening to nostalgic Christmas music

- Away in a Manger,
- I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas,
- Silver Bells
- I'll be home for Christmas...

But my parents knew and lived in a world where

- A world war had just ended,
- An aunt committed suicide,
- An uncle was an angry alcoholic,
- And plenty of folks all over the world wondered where their next meal would be coming from...

And my parents taught me about more than just Santa and Christmas presents. They introduced me to Jesus, the One who gave them hope and help in their everyday lives. This is the same Jesus who gives me hope and help in my everyday life. I'm not faithful like God would like me to be. But God is perfectly faithful to me. That's where my hope rests – in God who comes among us to give life.

I attended my 57 year old cousin's funeral on Monday. We grew up together, played tag, hide-n-go-seek, kick-the-can... Our families visited back and forth. I saw him at every family reunion that I was able to attend. He was single, no kids. Dan was a gentle giant, didn't drink, loved children, helped everybody, loved to talk and to laugh... He had his wood supply in for the winter. He had just purchased a mountain of bird seed for his little friends. Family members had just visited with him the day before. Nobody knew of anything troubling enough in his life to make him do what he did. He couldn't have imagined how much it would rip apart his family and friends. What happened? He must have been out of control...

Dan's funeral was at the church he'd been raised in. It is a very conservative, Pentecostal church. Since my youth I had seen that church as being very strict and judgmental. Dan had stopped going to the church years ago. As I thought about what the pastor might say in his sermon, I was fearful that Dan might be condemned to hell for taking his own life. Just moments before the service, I slipped into the sanctuary and sat down. These words rose up from the bottom of my soul. "**How big is your heart Lord? Big enough for Dan? (pause) And is it big enough for me?**"

The service started. Dan's brother read a three page description of Dan and of how he lived his generous, loving life. The young pastor read similar accounts written by Dan's other brother and sisters and nieces and nephews. It was a wonderful tribute. The old pastor who had been there when Dan was a child got up and recounted wonderful memories of Dan and his father, my uncle, helping with all kinds of projects around the church. Then the young pastor preached. I don't remember exactly what he said, but I heard the **grace of God** mentioned several times. He spoke of the **love and forgiveness of God** and of the **hope of eternal life** that Jesus brought for my cousin who had been stolen away from us by death.

It was then that I prayed my own confession for having been skeptical about what might happen in the service. It was then that I thanked God for God's heart big enough for Dan and for me.

After the service I told one of Dan's sisters how amazed I was that their 87 year old pastor was still involved in active ministry at their church. She looked me in the eye and said, "**He took us from rules-rules to grace. This place was all about rules-rules when our family first came here. Our pastor taught us about the grace of God.**"

Jesus is all about the grace of God. I know a young atheist. He hasn't met Jesus yet. He has only heard about the rules-rules. There are a lot of atheists like that out there. We introduced our kids to Jesus and we pray for them every day. Maybe you do the same.

John the Baptist preached about the rules-rules. Later after John witnessed Jesus' ministry he had second thoughts. From King Herod's dungeon, John sent a couple of his followers to see for sure if Jesus was really the Messiah at all. Jesus told them, "**Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers**

are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me. There's that "**good news**" idea again, this time from Jesus himself.

When I told my son John about Dan's death, John shared a saying that has become important to him. John thinks that this came from ancient Plato. "**Be kind for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle.**" Dan was in a hard battle. You may be too. Jesus came to carry us – through the battle and safely to the other side... Christmas – it's really not much about the snow, the bells or the gifts. Christmas is about the Messiah who comes to save the world, us, our kids, Dan, me... We live in the same dark world that they did 2,000 years ago. And we have the same hopeful light.

As I worked on this sermon Friday night, I got up and went into the sanctuary to reflect and to pray for God's guidance as to what I should say. I opened the door into the sanctuary and it was pitch black inside. Just a little light filtered in from where I stood. As I waited for my eyes to adjust I spotted a little light glowing under the altar. Stepping further into the sanctuary I realized that it was the light shining in the little stable at the center of our nativity scene. I carefully walked into the darkened room, leaned on the baptismal font and gazed at that little lighted space. There it was. **Dark world. Baby Emmanuel** come among us. **Hopeful, expectant people** gazing in. **Real people**, real lives, real hurts, needs, doubts, fears and failings. **Real God** who loves and cares for us now and forever... Dan, you, me, the people that you are thinking about right now – I'm going to trust their lives, deaths and salvation into the loving arms of Jesus. **He came to save us. That's Christmas. Jesus is here. You are his. He is yours. That's Christmas.** Amen.

