

December 18 – The Separation is Over

Luke 2:8-20

The fourth Sunday of Advent is here. We have been, through the words of various carols, looking at the great message of this season. We have been reminded of how Jesus came at a specific time to men and women who said yes to the great drama and work of God unfolding in their midst. Over and over we have been assured that God loves us. Today, by using the words from that great carol by Charles Wesley with the tune by Felix Mendelssohn, “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” we hear anew these great themes that come to us through the birth of Jesus.

It begins by talking about how God and sinner are reconciled. In Jesus’ birth the separation we experienced in the Garden of Eden has been reversed. Emmanuel, God is with us. We, who come to church each week, take this message for granted. Of course God is with us, loves us, and forgives us. Yet many in the world don’t get it. I think about my first church. The choir director’s husband only on occasion came to worship. He had a beautiful bass voice but chose not to sing with us. That first year we had a choir Christmas party. In visiting with him I invited him to join the choir. He looked at me and said, “Preacher, you don’t want my kind in church.” He said it with a smile but I could see some pain in his eyes. A few weeks later he was at the church with his wife and we had some time to talk without others around. I asked him what he meant. He told me he wasn’t good enough to come to church. He felt that you had to reach a certain level of respectability to be welcomed in church and he, by his own admission, smoked too much, drank a bit too much and swore way too much. When I asked him if he planned to smoke, drink or swear when he was in the church building he looked surprised and laughed and said, “No, my wife would kill me.” I replied, “Then what’s the problem?” I went on to say that Christians were not perfect. God came to forgive us. All God asks of us in return is to love God, love others and try to grow in grace. That, I told him, meant trying to do a little better each day. A tear came to his eye. “You mean you actually wouldn’t mind my coming to church?” he said. I learned later he had been told to leave a church when he was young because he was caught smoking by the preacher. He started attending and was faithful the rest of his life. God, in the baby

Jesus, came to be reconciled with all. Who do you know who needs to hear they are loved just the way they are?

It goes on to say “Light and life to all he brings”. We have talked about this before in this series but it bears repeating. Where we or others are feeling the darkness of life Jesus offers light. When we are seeing endings we are promised new beginnings. In the face of death we are given life. Light and life comes to us because of God’s love as shown to us by Jesus.

Finally we hear: “Mild he lays his glory by.” The word “Mild” has come to mean bland and who wants a bland, weak God. Mild used to be defined as gracious or merciful or even conciliatory. At the time Charles Wesley wrote these words mild could also mean softly radiant. God in Christ set aside his glory for us. The Apostle Paul talks about this in Philippians in a different way. He talks about how Jesus emptied himself of his divinity. Thinking about these definitions I have come to have a greater appreciation of what Charles Wesley might have been trying to say in these words about Christ’s coming to us and for us.

Jesus lays aside the softly radiant splendor of heaven to dwell amongst us. Think about what a sacrifice that would be. We strive to live a good and godly life because we are trying to prepare our hearts and souls for heaven. It is what we are looking to. To step away from that to live in this world of sin, of pain, of war, of temptation and death as a deliberate choice and doing it out of love for you and me, wow. It reminds me of a man whose wife had dementia. He could not take care of her but he could also not bear the thought of being away from her. He chose to move into the care facility with her. For several years he chose to live with many just like his wife out of love. Now I am not saying that this is what everyone should do but in hearing his story it reminds me a bit of how much God loves us. Quietly Jesus set aside the radiant splendor of heaven to live in my world. Where can I share quietly that love with others?

He did it graciously. Sometimes we see people having to lay aside their glory. They usually do not do it with grace. Athletes get caught taking enhancing drugs and they leave the field blaming everyone else. Financiers go to jail for defrauding others

angrily saying that they were doing just what everyone else has done. Yes, people lay aside the glory they have, wealth and power, but it is usually done angrily and because of being forced out because of misdeeds. On occasion we see one who does it with grace. President Jimmy Carter, when he lost his bid for a second term, left office with one of the lowest approval ratings for a president ever. The country by ballot and by word said he was ineffective. It would have been easy for him to become angry or bitter. Instead, he began to work with Habitat for Humanity and became one of the world leaders actively working for peace. In retirement he is now seen as one of our most beloved former presidents. When he battled brain cancer last year the support that came to him from around the world and our country was incredible. He stepped aside graciously when his power was stripped away from him and in living that grace has been an incredible example.

Where are we too full of ourselves? Where do we see the need for us to be first, to be recognized gets in the way of our really helping others? Where have we pouted when not been thanked appropriately, at least as we define it, for deeds done? What does that say to others about us, or about our faith? How can we be gracious and humble in our relationship to others?

Finally, it could mean that he lay his glory by as a conciliatory or peacemaking offer to the world. Remember what the angels sang after proclaiming his birth to the shepherds: "Glory to God in the highest and on earth Peace." Think for just a moment, what is required for peace to happen. Here I am thinking about a peace that comes from a mutual desire to not live in conflict instead of the peace that is imposed by the victor on the vanquished. We know that later action comes with terms of surrender. It ends the conflict and so technically people are now at peace but often it does nothing more than sow seeds of hatred that will sprout at some later time. God did not impose peace but came mildly to work at creating peace with us.

For true peace to occur we have to value the other person. When we see them as a person of worth, with their own desires and longings peace is more likely. When they are labeled or categorized then peace is almost impossible. Peace is more likely to happen when we realize that we have common goals that we can work towards more

efficiently together or at least we admit that our battling each other is accomplishing nothing. Peace happens when we come to understand that reconciliation is preferable to just winning.

I am reminded about what happened in South Africa. After decades of apartheid which had led to global condemnation and sanctions there came that moment when the leadership gave in and began to work with the black majority and create a new government. Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela were among those thrust into new leadership roles. They formed a truth and reconciliation commission soon after elections of the first black leaders. That commission, except for the most heinous of cases, opted for forgiveness and pardons. They realized that if South Africa was to move forward they would have to do so together, blacks and whites and others. Reprisals would only result in a downwards escalating cycle of violence. Now I am not saying things are perfect there, but they have done better at making the transition from white colonial leadership to native leadership than most countries in Africa because they truly tried to work at peace.

Then to think that seeing God as peacemaker means we are valued, our opinions matter, that God wants to work with us and not just dominate us, is a humbling thing. The babe born is a reminder of God's love and a challenge for us to live humbly, mercifully and graciously. Hark the herald angels sing!