

December 18, 2016

4th Sunday in Advent

Texts for this week's Blended (Traditional) Service:

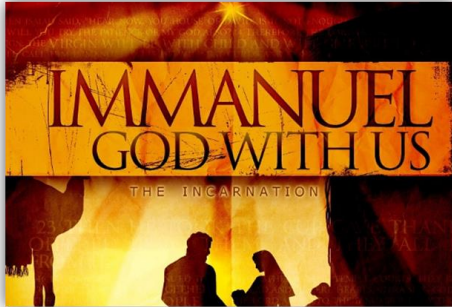
Psalms 24 (ESV)

Isaiah 7:10-17 (NIRV)

Romans 1:1-7 (NIRV)

Matthew 1:18-25 (ESV)

Sermon Outline



New Through His Grace – an Advent reflection on Isaiah 7:10-17

“... the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.”

Intro – We continue our focus on being made new and singing the new song of Christ. This week's reading from Isaiah is a text rich with words of promise and grace. The heart of the text is God's promise of the sign of his love – Immanuel!

I. *A Word about the text*

- a. In its day, it was a promise given to King Ahaz that God was on his side. According to the Concordia Bible, it was a *“figurative way of predicting that within nine months it will be so evident that God is with his people that she will name her son Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’* The child was a sign of God's love.
- b. Centuries later, the Apostle Matthew applied this text to the virgin birth of Jesus. He is God's sign of his love and favor toward humanity. (Matthew 1:22-23)
- ✓ Key Point – Both births were signs of God's love and favor toward us. This is grace! By God's grace, Judah's people were saved from ruin at the hands of her enemies. By God's grace, we are saved from ruin at the hands of our enemies – sin, death and the devil.

II. *A Word about the text for us today*

- a. The Letter to the Romans takes the incarnation and lifts its significance for believers today. Paul cannot write of our Lord's birth, without connecting it to his death and resurrection – for it is from the totality of Jesus' life as “God with us” that we obtain God's grace!
- b. It is by God's grace – his love and favor – that we are made new. And as surely as God gave the miraculous birth of a son to the virgin as a sign, so, also, does God give signs today. We want to be clear that the birth of Jesus is a sign that will not be repeated, nevertheless there is continuing evidence (signs) of God's love in our world today!
- ✓ Key Point – As we let God's grace shape our lives today and make us new again, WE BECOME God's signs in the world of his continuing love and favor toward his creation! What might such love look like in our lives today? How about non-judgmental mercy toward those in need? (Jesus feeding the 5000.) How about believing in someone when that person has stopped believing in him/herself? (Jesus believing in Peter after his denials.) How about having a servant's heart toward those for whom we have a responsibility? (Jesus washing the feet of the disciples.)

Closing – As we draw to the close of Advent, we do so remembering that Immanuel was God's sign of grace. As we grow in letting the fullness of his incarnation shape our lives, we are made new and we, ourselves, can become the signs of his presence in our world – signs that reflect hope, peace, joy and especially LOVE!

All Glory to God alone!

Pastor Buono

December 18, 2016

4th Sunday in Advent

Text for this week's Contemporary Service: Romans 1:1-7

Sermon Outline



Made New Through His Grace: An Advent Reflection on Romans 1:1-7 and Isaiah 7:10-17

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace...

(Romans 1:1-5a)

Intro – We continue our focus on being made new and singing the new song of Christ. Our focus, this week, is on being made new through his grace – a grace revealed most fully in the incarnation. The prophet Isaiah wrote that the Lord, himself, would give a sign – the virgin birth! Matthew applies that promise to the miraculous birth of Jesus. He is IMMANUEL, God with us, and he changes everything!

I. *A Word about the incarnation (God with us) and grace*

- a. The Letter to the Romans takes the incarnation and lifts its significance for believers today. Paul cannot write of our Lord's birth without connecting it to his death and resurrection – for it is from the totality of Jesus' life as "God with us" that we obtain God's grace!
 - b. God's grace is his love and favor toward us. We see this in many ways – we especially see it in his sacrificial death on the cross for sinners. At the cross, we see that God with us (Immanuel) is also and, especially, God for us!
- ✓ **Key Point** – As surely as God gave the miraculous birth of a son to the virgin as a sign, so, also, does God give us signs today – signs of his love and favor!

II. *A Word about being made new through his grace*

- a. As we let God's grace shape our lives today and make us new again, WE BECOME God's signs in the world of his continuing love and favor toward his creation!
 - b. A story of being made new through His grace– Genevieve's story.
- ✓ **Key Point** – Immanuel changes everything. Each of us has need to be made new by God's love. What that need is for each of us may be very different, but when we let God's grace (his love and favor in Christ) shape us, our lives are changed in significant ways for the better.

Closing – As we draw to the close of Advent, we do so remembering that Immanuel was God's sign of grace. As we grow in letting the fullness of his incarnation shape our lives, we are made new, and we, ourselves, can become the signs of his presence in our world – signs that reflect hope, peace, joy and especially LOVE!

All Glory to God Alone!

Pastor Neil Buono

This is Genevieve's story.

It's a true story about someone I knew growing up in Brooklyn, New York. It's a story about being made new by God's grace – his love and favor – with all the many contours and rough edges of real life. We might call it grace in the city. For Genevieve, her example of letting God's grace shape her life shaped my life in significant ways. And I am confident that today she has been made new in heaven in ways that I can only imagine.

She was one of seven siblings born into a family of very modest means. Genevieve was the child born with several strikes against her. She was blind in one eye and had limited sight in the other. As she got older, she never grew much past the stature of a middle school child. Throughout her life, she was relatively frail physically. Genevieve did not have much of an education. She never married. Her main vocation in life was to be the sister who took care of everybody else. She lived with an older sister in what I would describe as a substandard urban apartment in a neighborhood best experienced in daylight.

For as long as I knew her, she had a deep and abiding faith in God and God's care for her. It is – as I recall – a faith she grew into over her life as she came to rely more and more on God and the mercy and charity of others. She suffered no small amount of injustices. Her siblings often took advantage of her. Genevieve was an easy target because she was so gentle and frail. At one point, I recall speaking a harsh word to her and I could tell immediately I had hurt her deeply – but she held onto it and, I learned later, gave it to the Lord in prayer.

As I grew older, I came to learn that this woman had an extraordinary prayer and devotion life. She couldn't read very well so she went to 'mass' every day at the neighborhood Catholic church between where she lived and where we lived to hear the message and to be strengthened by word and sacrament. I'm sure she spoke unkindly about others, but I never heard such a word from her. I did from my mother and the rest of my family. But not from her.

I don't think that was by accident. While she could not grow physically or financially she grew spiritually. I recall one time when I was with her and she was caring for her aging and very infirm father, she had simply run out of the energy to keep going. She had no money to speak of so she would walk everywhere she went. To get to her father's house she had to walk several miles each way and she made that pilgrimage almost daily to care for him. Sometimes, when the weather was really awful, she would ride the bus.

On this one day, she was flat out depleted. I had made the trek with her and was standing with her at the foot of his bed when she started weeping. She cried out to God that she couldn't do it anymore and she needed something to keep her going. At that moment, the crucifix that hung over his bed came off the wall. We both stopped and knew that was more than a coincidence.

Genevieve continued her daily trek after that, stopping to feed her spirit at the church, until finally he died. Throughout this journey, as my life went in its own direction, I watched her grow in grace. She embodied to me what being made new by God's grace looked like. It was a life grounded in a relationship with God and expressed in service to others.

So who was this woman? Genevieve was my aunt. I was long gone from Brooklyn when God called her home. My father told me that she died peacefully in her sleep with a smile on her face. I imagine that she died, having been made new by his grace, with the peace that passes all human understanding.

She certainly influenced me. I have no doubt that one reason I have the faith I have is because of her example of courage in the face of adversity and her hope in the midst of difficulty. Genevieve loved me as her own son, and she was in many ways my spiritual mother.

In her life I saw firsthand that God's grace – his love and favor – can make something new. God never changed the circumstances of her life but he changed her along the way so she could weather them and in the midst of them, witness to her faith and offer to me the gifts of love and hope.