

Sermon Notes
Christmas Eve 2016
The Assurance of God's Mercy

December 24, 2016

The Reverend Mark Pruitt

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in
darkness have seen a great
light;
those who lived in a land of deep
darkness--on them light has
shined.

You have multiplied the nation,
you have increased its joy;
they rejoice before you
as with joy at the harvest,
as people exult when
dividing plunder.

For the yoke of their burden,
and the bar across their
shoulders, the rod of their
oppressor, you have broken
as on the day of Midian.

For all the boots of the tramping
warriors and all the
garments rolled in blood

shall be burned as fuel for
the fire.

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his
shoulders; and he is named

Wonderful Counselor, Mighty
God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

His authority shall grow
continually, and there shall
be endless peace

for the throne of David and his
kingdom. He will establish
and uphold it

with justice and with righteousness
from this time onward and
forevermore.

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will
do this.

Titus 2:11-14

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Introduction

Making list is a part of daily life, and part of Christmastime, too. We write down important things that we have to take care of (some of you may be thinking about those lists even now!) or, increasingly, we use electronic devices to keep our lists. The kind of list I'd like us to think about now, one which I think we all probably keep, is probably not a paper list, or electronically-kept list. It's a list we keep in our heads of the things that are essential, must-haves for Christmas. It just wouldn't be Christmas without certain things. Our lists will differ, but we keep an "It wouldn't be Christmas without these things" list, sub-consciously as they say, a lists only activated when something essential is forgotten

"*Chestnuts roasting on an open fire*" is on the list of a well-known popular song as an essential

element along with “turkey, some mistletoe, and tiny tots with eyes all aglow.” Other must-haves for Christmas might include : walks in the snow, favorite foods and drinks, trips to homeless shelters to help others, and—I have learned for my family—a real, pine-smelling, Christmas tree, the kind that dry out and became susceptible to fire.

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For the next few minutes, consider my list of *three* must-haves for Christmas as essential to the good news we herald to the world and to ourselves tonight. First, it It just wouldn’t be Christmas at St. Paul’s for me without the wonderful—the wonder-filled—*Prelude of Carols* that we’ve just heard. I say this not primarily as a thank you to Dan and Valerie, to the choirs and musicians—though I can’t thank them enough for all that they have poured into the music and poured out to us. More than this, I mean this item on my list to say something about how our rich Anglican heritage tries to match the richness of Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ, theologians say, is *superabundant*. That is the word they use to talk about Jesus as a massively rich reality. No one No one thought, no one person, can capture, or contain, or exhaust who He is. He is infinitely rich. A lifetime won’t be long enough to take it all in. To borrow a phrase most of us will know from an old movie, Jesus Christ is a many-splendored reality. A many-splendored reality, needs more voices in play, not fewer, tonight.

Our musical offering is not mere ornamentation, like an optional extra, leading up to the proclamation of the sermon, which is the real serious stuff. The sermon, *this* sermon, with the help of God, *is* meant to be serious stuff. But the musical offering, like the liturgy, is not meant to be mere scaffolding for something else. It’s part of the proclamation. It’s letting others---the authors of the lyrics and the tunes, and the gospel writers and the composers of the prayers we pray—who have been *shaped* by the good news *to share* in *shouting out* the good news to the world. It’s letting them all play a part as our tutors, our mentors, in the gospel.

Whether it is a Sunday morning, or Christmas Eve, we don’t restrict the proclamation of the good news to the sermon and to one voice alone. We spread it out! We spread it out, you see, because Jesus Christ has generated a quiet explosion of creativity that has captured the talents of countless men and women. He’s eager to do the same with your talents and mine, too. He himself, through His Spirit, has shaped these lives as faithful testimonies to him and borne fruit in those lives meant to speak to you and me of truth. His history includes his powerful effects.

So, the voice, if you will, in our opening offering was of George Woodward. He reshaped a dancehall tune, added lyrics that took the tune in a Godward direction, and gave us *Ding Dong Merrily On High* to remind us, in the midst of whatever the world faces, that the gospel allows us to rejoice even in the midst of struggle. And the voices of countless medieval artists come in play when we sing *The Seven Joys of Mary*. Artists would paint vignettes of the whole sweep of Jesus’ life to remind us that to stand in the Christmas season is always to look at the Easter Season. The birth in Bethlehem was the earthly start of Jesus march to the cross as the ultimate triumph of grace. These paintings gave rise to the song.

It just wouldn’t be Christmas without the Prelude of Carols speaking the glad news of a salvation to

our imagination and, as maybe only music can do, to our emotions.

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For me, secondly, *it just wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't take home with us tonight a renewed confidence in the mercy of God.* This is the glad burden I bear as a preacher tonight. The *guarantee* of God's mercy pulses through every page of the New Testament. The deep foundation of this confidence is not (as it is for so many today) the *speculative* thought that there is a warm forgiving wave of the divine hand in heaven, pardoning all offences. No, the basis for our assurance of mercy is the *very specific, actual history of this life*, the life of Jesus, born on the margins of life, in a stable, humble, tender, meek and mild, who teaches us what truth and mercy look like as he marches through our history pronouncing forgiveness and showing mercy that is anything but uninvolved. This is the pledge God makes to us.

This is the life, the One, who will illumine darkened minds, and reshape unruly hearts and affections. This is the One whose mercy lifts up those who stumble and sin: who saves people from self-inflicted wounds; and heals wounds however inflicted. He leads people to know and praise God in the midst of suffering: he leads people to peace inside and with others. He leads people to make mid-course corrections. We are not speculating about mercy, dreaming "what-if?" It happened. We can study it, read about it, and experience it.

The assurance of God's actual mercy is right at the heart of Christian living. **Do you long for more spiritual ecstasy?** Contemplating God's mercy played out in the life of Christ is the source of a profound spiritual delight. The deep-release we experience and call spiritual renewal and rebirth comes when we realize that Jesus has come to us on the tide of God's love. *"By this mercy,"* Peter would write to Gentile converts in the first century, *"we have been anew to a living hope"* (1 Peter 1:3). His birth leads ultimately to our rebirth. **Do you want more strength and stability for daily living?** Contemplating God's mercy played out in the life of Christ is also the source of a profound settledness. New patterns of life replace old ways of living. This mercy makes a difference in how we treat others and relate to them.

Mark Coppenger, a sometime seminary president, told his students (of which I was one) often, a story I love to tell often. He was at a Chicago Bulls basketball game. Back in the 1990's to see the star Michael Jordan. At halftime the lines were long at the concession stands. The vendors had run out of some of the foods they advertised. People were complaining. It was getting ugly, he said. But he noticed one woman near the front of line, where people were jostling and shouting, who kept her cool. She was patient and kind. And so he went up to her, complimented her on her tranquility, and asked her *"Are you a Christian?"* Not something Episcopalians are known to do. And she said, *"Sanctified!"*

She was rooted, and grounded, and being built up in Christ's love (Colossians 2.7). She was sanctified, set apart to live Christ's way in the world. Maybe that's not something we reaffirm often enough. But, one way of another, we should reaffirm tonight the *liberation* that God's mercy brings to us in Christ: It is forgiveness. It is justification. It is sanctification. We know God's tender mercy toward us. He is longsuffering, patient, and filled with loving-kindness. We

can be that, too.

The less sure we are about God's active mercy, the more brittle, thin-skinned, and self-centered we become, like the displeased crowd complaining around the concession stand, who weren't getting what they wanted. We shrink and become more and more isolated from others. The more we live in the reality of Christ, the more we have time for others, patience for others, love for others. And the more easily we can be alone with God, baring our souls, to their core. Convinced of God's mercy we can, in this church, on a walk under the stars open to eternity, bare our souls to God, admit our evasions, our fears, our sins, because we know it's a God of mercy to whom we confess our fears and illusions. It just wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't renew our assurance of God's mercy.

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Last, it wouldn't be Christmas if we didn't hear the claim--and it's a bold claim--that there is no darkness that can snuff out the light of Christ and therefore we can live without the kind of fear that paralyzes us. Or more positively, there is no state of human affairs to which God the gospel does not speak, no state in which God is not actively seeking to let his transformative power play out. God uses the church, people outside the church, and God moves and speaks directly, to work his transformation.

Fatigue? Addiction? Depression? Broken relationships? Regrets that pull you to the past? Anxieties that make you frightful of the future? No apparent light at the end of the tunnel? No good prospects? Despair over this or that? I don't need to name all the pathologies that tear apart our souls and our relationships. I don't need to list all the places where the same envy and hate that hails from Cain and Abel haunts us and has led to war. But these things are heavy on my mind.

It's part of the truthfulness of the gospel to admit that there is real darkness, real despair, in the world. Isaiah says that the light shone to a people in *darkness*. It was true of his time, Jesus' time, and our time. We can never say that human history is a steady march of progress, always up and to the right like the chart of stock whose price never goes down. We can never erase all the ambiguities of life. And yet, God has given us a self-revelation, some real knowledge of God's core being, so powerful and compelling that we can trust God in his life. We can guide our lives by this light that shone first in Bethlehem and then on the shores of Galilee and now in our hearts with God's glory on the face of Christ (2 Cor 4). This is the cause for our rejoicing. God's coming as a savior, with truth and power and grace enough for a lifetime.

Conclusion

So, the God who summons you to this Communion Table tonight and waits for you here, is a God of self-declared, revealed mercy. Come and accept His mercy. Don't resolve to be a hero or save the world or do anything in these next moments except to let God be God, this God. God in His time will show you what comes next. You will get your marching orders. I will get mine. For now, come and adore, accept the mercy, rejoice in His Light, Amen.

About this publication: Many have asked for written copies of our sermons. *Sermon Notes* is a response to that request from one of our preachers, Mark Pruitt. These notes that: the written notes, typed in advance of the sermon that shape the sermon eventually delivered—usually with some divergence, condensation, or expansion, from this written form. Often the sermon may be quite different in outline and presentation from these notes, though not so much in content. Generally, these notes will be (ideally, anyhow) more polished and flowing as befits written expression, while the sermon will aim, as it should, for more connectivity through personal address. In either form, our sermons at St. Paul’s strive to promote wise reflection on biblical themes and texts, issue calls to discipleship and intentional growth in God’s grace and mission, and embody the confidence (even when it sometimes takes the form of questioning and searching) that God speaks to us in the here and now.

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The Real Jesus Meets Real People . . . to Make Them Fruitful

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