

Christ the King Sunday

November, 25, 2007

Luke 1: 68-79 Prophecy of Zechariah, father of John the Baptist "...Whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on High to give light to those who stand in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace..."

Colossians 1: 11-20 "...For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell..."

*Read the story from "Epiphanies" for Christ the King Sunday,
By Stephen R. Lawhead.

In ancient cultures the need for such rituals was considered necessary to the survival of the tribe or culture. Year after year, time and time again it was deemed necessary for the most exalted member of the tribe to be sacrificed to appease the 'gods' and to guarantee the continued existence and success of the people. Year after year, time and time again, over and over; after many repetitions of this pattern it would almost seem like a broken record, playing the same lines again and again and again. The tribe would bring out the 'favored' one to be sacrificed, put him or her to death and then go back to life as usual, falsely secure in their knowledge that all was as it should be. They were stuck in a ritual.

How a culture could get stuck in such a ritual is beyond my comprehension. We know from the history books that after many years kings figured out that there was not much future in being killed at the end of the year and they began to select others to take their place. We know from passages in the Old Testament that such practices existed even among the Jewish people. There are stories of

Jewish kings who sacrificed their own children to pagan gods as they began to stray from the one true God (2 Kings 3:16, Jeremiah 32:35, Ezekiel 16:21). God responds that he never asked that of them. Many times God speaks through his prophets that such sacrifices are an abomination to him. Many times it is said that the acceptable sacrifice to God is the sacrifice of one's heart; service to others, and walking in humble relationship with our maker. But all too often in the history of mankind we see examples of how we, as human beings, get caught up in our rituals and forget that what is important is our spiritual relationship with God.

I ask you, as we prepare for the Advent Season, to think about our patterns of life and rituals of worship. (*According to our United Methodist Book of Worship the word 'advent' is derived from the Latin 'adventus', which means 'coming'. The BOW says "The season proclaims the comings of the Christ-whose birth we prepare to celebrate once again, who comes continually in Word and Spirit, and whose return in final victory we anticipate. Each year Advent calls the community of faith to prepare for these comings..."*) Each year we go from Advent as we anticipate the coming of Jesus, then we celebrate His birth at Christmas, then we remember His life during Lent and mourn His death and celebrate His resurrection at Easter. Then we go on about our lives for another year. Today, I want guide you to be thoughtful about the coming Advent Season, is it a time to once again repeat the patterns and rituals of life as we have so many times before? Or is it a time to move ahead in our spiritual journey? I am not saying there is something wrong with commemorating these special times and events, it is good that we should celebrate them. But I am saying we should not get stuck in the rituals and forget the importance of moving ahead spiritually in our relationship with God and our relationships with each other.

Our Scripture reading today from the Book of Colossians, chapter 1 verses 11 through 20 is about the eternal Kingship of Jesus Christ and is preceded by these words from the apostle Paul; “And so, from the day we heard, we have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so as to walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.” (*Reference: The word that is used in this passage from Colossians for knowledge is ‘epignosis’ and is more intentional than the word ‘gnosis’ by itself, according to the Lexical aids to the New Testament in the Hebrew Greek Study Bible NAS version which explains ‘epignosis’ as “...increasing in the knowledge of God.” expresses a more thorough participation in the object of knowledge.*) Paul is said to have written the letter to Colossae, among other purposes, to correct some false teachings that had begun to grow there. In particular, some of the members of the church at Colossae had begun to teach a doctrine of Gnosticism. Gnosticism added to the message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. They were purported to have said that salvation could only be attained by gaining in knowledge (gnosis) about the spiritual and physical make-up of the universe. The important message of Paul was that there is nothing that can be added to the message of Christ, the message of salvation by grace through faith. The knowledge (epignosis) that Paul exhorts the Colossians to attain is not so much about head knowledge as it is an experiential knowledge of God through the development of your relationship with him. I believe that what Paul teaches is that because of our salvation by grace through our faith we cannot help but to desire to “...walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to Him.” as a measure of

our appreciation of that unearned salvation. It is evidenced by our desire to develop our relationship with the very Lord who has ransomed us.

As I see it, the point is that we are not to get caught up in the trap of measuring each other and sizing one another up in our differing levels of spiritual progress. Nor are we to become stagnant and stuck in a repetitious pattern of ritual upon ritual. Yes, Christ died so that we could be saved; again and again no matter how many times we may fall, confess our failure, and then repent. But that is living on one side of the cross. We are called to live on the other side of the cross, the side of resurrection. We are called to be continually transformed into the image of Jesus Christ, an image we can not attain in this moment on this day but can only hope to continually progress toward each and every day of our lives. We do this as we enter into and develop our relationship with God. That is one of the results of an intentional process of spiritual formation. We are undergoing change and transformation all the time. We cannot help but to be changed as we go through life. Life changes us! We can either be changed arbitrarily by the influences of the world or we can choose to be changed in a way that is pleasing to the God who so loves us. Spiritual Formation is a way of being intentional about the way in which we are changed. It is a continual process whereby we engage in the many differing means of grace that bring us closer and closer to Christ and whereby we are shaped more and more in His image. Yes, we are saved by the death of Christ upon the cross and that death proves God's love for us. When we accept Christ our old self dies with Christ upon the cross and it is time for us to live with the resurrected Christ! We are called to be transformed and live with Jesus on the other side of the cross, the side of life in the fullness of the image of Christ!

Think of it as a puzzle with many pieces. The finished product of the puzzle, once all the pieces are put together, is a picture of Jesus Christ. But we start out with a box full of individual pieces, all scattered and jumbled together. I remember years ago, our family would get what was called a 'jigsaw puzzle' around this time of year. We would open the box and pour all the pieces of the puzzle that were in the box on the kitchen table and look at the pile of pieces before we would begin to put the puzzle together. We would think that there was no way the jumbled pile of pieces would ever look like the picture on the front of the box the puzzle came in. We knew we had to start out with one piece at a time and put the puzzle together bit by bit. Each and every piece has worth in and of itself. Each and every piece has purpose and meaning and value to the desired final product. Each and every piece is important to the completion of the puzzle. But if you leave out any piece, or put it where it does not belong, the final product will not look quite like the designer of the puzzle intended. That is why we are called to be intentional about how we put together the pieces of the puzzle that form our spiritual formation. The pieces are the steps we take in the process of that spiritual formation. Sometimes we don't even know how the piece fits, we don't recognize how it furthers the image we hope to attain. But leave the piece out and when you look back on the finished product you see where it was intended to be used to put the whole picture together.

One way to put together the pieces of the puzzle that are part of spiritual formation, one of the processes that transforms each of us into the image of Christ, can be found in the means of grace. You develop your relationship with God through your participation in the means of grace made available by a church that is active and

intentional in the spiritual formation of its membership. Worship is a means of grace. Mission in service to others is a means of grace. Bible study is a means of grace. Daily prayer and meditation on God's Word is a means of grace. Loving fellowship with one another and other members of the Body of Christ is a means of grace. It is through all these different yet connected means that the Holy Spirit molds us and shapes us into the eventual person that God intends each and every one of us to be; that person whom exhibits the image of Christ. I can look out among the members of this congregation and visualize different parts of the image of Christ in each of you. I experience that image of Christ in the way some of you give yourselves to worship. I experience it in the way some of you give of yourselves in service to others. I experience the image of Christ in the questions you ask and opinions you express in Bible study. I see it in some of you as we fellowship together. In these and in many other ways I see and experience the image of Christ through the collective Body of Christ; and that is a wonderful sight to behold!

But, even though we all represent different parts of the Body, even though we are each one of us collective pieces of the puzzle that is the church; we are each also called to be transformed in His image individually. We are each called to engage in all the different means of grace and to allow the Holy Spirit to transform us into the person God made us individually to be, individuals molded and shaped into the image of Christ. Yes, God loves each and every one of us just the way we are and nothing we can do will change how much he loves us; but He loves us too much to want us to stay the way we are today. There is nothing we can do to make him to love us more or to make him to love us less. But he does have a purpose for each of us that lies beyond who and what we are on this day.

Because of his love He not only shined his light upon us, but He sent his light to live with us as one of us, so that we may be filled with that light and be transformed by it and then transmit that light to others. So I challenge you, each of you; if you are involved in worship but do not attend a Bible study, or you do not work in a mission effort in service to others, or do not take the opportunity to be in fellowship with other members of this body, or if your daily prayer life is not as meaningful as you know it could be then I challenge you to find a way to add yet another means of grace to your already busy lives. If you currently are involved in one, two, or even three of these ministries of the church then I challenge you to ask God to give you the energy and time for yet another. And if you, model disciple that you are, are satisfied that you are involved in all the means of grace that the church makes available to you then I challenge you to ask the Holy Spirit to take you to even deeper experiences of God so that you may lead the rest of us to that holy place.

I know that I have asked a lot. I know that I myself fall short of the image of Christ that my Creator calls me to hope to attain. I look in the mirror and I don't see Jesus! I could, each one of us could, be easily overwhelmed by all the many pieces it takes to put the puzzle together in the complete image of Christ. It is a daunting task that can only be achieved with the help of God and the Holy Spirit. It is only through being involved in a community of believers and engaged in the many means of grace that any one of us can hope to eventually be transformed and formed into the eventual image of Jesus Christ. It only happens one piece of the puzzle at a time, one step at a time, one day at a time, one person at a time, in one lifetime at a time. Yes God loves me, you, all of us, just the way we

are and because of that love He desires even more and better things for us. Ask Him to help you become the image of who he wants you to be and through your willingness to respond to his love God will begin to transform you into the image for the purpose of which he created you to be.

So, on this Christ the King Sunday, as we approach the Season of Advent I ask you to look at the patterns and rituals of your lives. Are you stuck in the rituals of the seasons? Are you repeating the same patterns again and again? Are you doing the same old things over and over? Are you stuck on one piece of the puzzle? Or are you asking God to continually mold and shape you into the image of who he wants you to be. Have you willingly given yourself to God to allow the Holy Spirit to transform you from the person you are today to the image of who He wants you to be in all the tomorrows that lie ahead? I am not saying there is anything wrong with who we are, I am just saying there is more out there for us, for all of us! There is life in the fullness of the life that is the light of the world, the light of the resurrected Jesus Christ!

Christ died so that we could be saved. Christ was resurrected and lives today so that we can move on over to the other side of the cross and live in the image of who God intends us to be!

In Jesus' name, Amen.