



WESTMINSTER
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The Tender Mercy of Our God

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And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break up upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace (Luke 1:76-79).

I'll be fairly brief for our communion meditation this morning. Mostly I just want to ask a question and invite us all to ponder it. I want to ask whether what we do here in church makes any real difference in the way we live in the world, and if so, what exactly is that difference?

It was another rough week in the news, wasn't it? We've had a lot of those lately. There was another mass shooting, the biggest since Newtown but not even the only one last week, since shootings of four or more people now average around one a day in America. This particular rampage involved a Muslim couple apparently inspired by that vicious group ISIS, which will ratchet up fear in general and anti-Muslim feelings in particular. Meanwhile, Americans debated whether or not to welcome 10,000 Syrian refugees, a fraction of those already received by other countries. And while all that was going on, more than 190 nations met in France to talk about climate change, which many scientists say threatens catastrophe if we don't address it soon, while some other people insist that there really isn't a problem, or at least not a problem we should try to do anything about.

It was a hard week in the news, and those are just a few of the headlines. We can't address the details now,

and the issues are surely complicated, but our question for the moment is, does Christian faith have anything to do with the way we respond to these kinds of challenges, as well as the way we live our private lives? Does faith limit our fear, stretch our compassion, deepen our love, and fill us with a sense of stewardship for creation and all its inhabitants? Or does it not do any of those things?

There are people who think Christianity is only about getting individual souls to heaven and has not much at all to do with the way we relate to this world, except for personal evangelism and a few matters of individual morality. Of course evangelism and personal morality are important, but you have to cut out a great deal of the Bible in order to limit Christianity to those things alone. You have to neglect most of the biblical prophets and much of what Jesus says about justice, the Golden Rule, loving our neighbors as ourselves, and how we treat those who are hungry or sick or strangers or in prison.

I look around the church sometimes—not just here, but the Christian church in general—and I find myself asking how our commitment to Jesus Christ modifies any of our other commitments based on social, political, economic, or psychological interests. If the answer is that it makes no real difference, then I wonder what we're doing here, besides offering a bit of a boost to get people through the week and holding out the hope of heaven when all this is over.

That's not how I understand the gospel, but of course the gospel and the church are not the same thing. Sometimes the church is faithful to the gospel and

sometimes it isn't. Sometimes Christianity seems practically invisible, like those clear plastic covers we put on our cell phones to keep them from getting scratched, where the more inconspicuous they are, the better.

But on the other hand, sometimes people invite Jesus all the way into their hearts and let the Holy Spirit animate their own spirits, and then the love of God shines through and God's redemption breaks out in all sorts of ways, public and private. When that happens, people of faith ask what Jesus really wants, and they listen for answers beyond their own immediate interests and inclinations, and pray for the grace to live as Christ wants us to live, here and now and for all eternity.

Jeremiah says that there will be a new covenant one day, where God's law is written on people's hearts and not just on tablets of stone or paper. In that day people won't have to be coaxed or cajoled into doing what's right; they'll want to do it automatically because they will want whatever God wants. Hearts that are open to God will be transformed, and all those hearts will be strengthened and glad.

The gospel tells us that the high priest Zechariah was in the temple one day, doing church as usual, or the Jewish equivalent of church. Then a strange thing happened. Breaking into the routine of ritual, a messenger from God showed up. The angel said, in short: "God is about to do great things through you. Your wife will have a son in her old age, and you will call him John, and he will prepare the way of the Lord, who is about to do even greater things."

But the high priest is skeptical. He's old, after all, and the couple's having a child at this age would be highly unusual. But maybe something else is going on as well. Maybe Zechariah has grown accustomed to the form of religion but he no longer expects much power to come out of it. Maybe he's lowered his expectations so as not to rock the boat, either with his own people or with the powers of Rome.

In any case, he responds to the word that God is on the move, not with joy and faith but with fear and doubt. That's the sort of reaction that always annoys the angels. "Look," says Gabriel. "I come from God, and I bring good news. But since you don't believe me, you will not be able to say another word until you see that all these things have begun to take place."

Now Zechariah has lots of time to think while his lips are sealed. And then at last his improbable son arrives, and when the crowd insists that the boy be named after him, the way things are always done, his wife, Elizabeth, speaks for the priest and says, "No, his name will be John." Zechariah confirms in writing what his wife has said, and suddenly the high priest can speak again. He says, among other things, "By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Now you're talking, Zechariah. If a priest can't tell the truth he's heard from God, then he should not speak at all. But when he's willing to tell the truth, God will give him the words to say.

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What difference will it make when the priest tells the truth? Well, it might make all the difference in the world. Maybe someone will rise up to prepare the way for God's own Word to walk among us, forgiving our sins and showing anyone who's willing to listen how God wants us to live.

Not everyone will listen, of course. Many will resist because, truth be told, they have other priorities. But some will listen, and God may use them to do great things. And then the world will be amazed at the tender mercy of our God, who forgives all our shortcomings and has the power to make all things new, including even us.



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