

Of Times And Places

Luke 3:1-6

Trinity Lutheran – Kearney, Missouri

December 9, 2012 – Second Sunday in Advent



In the name of the Father, and † of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen. Have you ever set out on the task of reading the Bible cover to cover – only to be tripped up in this most valiant effort by the first section you came to filled with names and places difficult to pronounce? Assuming you started with the book of Genesis, the first such hurdle you would have encountered is the fourth chapter, beginning at the 16th verse, where the family of Cain, the son of Adam is listed. There you'd find names such as Irad, and Mehujael, and Methushael, and Lamech, as well as, Adah, Zillah, Tubal-Cain, and Namaah – names that don't easily slide off one's tongue.

It's there where you likely would have stopped, or you may actually have pushed forward determining not to get too hung up on names and places. In one sense the latter is certainly preferable to the former. After all, it was Martin Luther himself who said that when reading the Bible if you come across something you can't understand (or a name you can't pronounce), just pass that part by and glorify God. But, there's very real sense in which these names and places are important. In fact, the inclusion of specific names, places and times sets apart the one true God and our Christian faith from all the other false deities, religions and cults which men have set up over the years. It's especially important to realize this fact during the hectic Christmas holidays when so many people are looking for and hoping to be close to God – to find God, know God and incorporate Him somehow into their life.

Some "find" Him in the spirit of giving which is so highly exalted at this time of year. Some look for him in the bonds of family where, when loved ones come together, everything just seems to be good and right – perhaps even holy. Others look for God in the "miracles" of the season – such as one might find in the person of Scrooge from the well known story of the Christmas Carol. And still others look for Him in the mood, feeling and emotions of the holidays. But to paraphrase the words of the Prophet, this too is a chasing after wind. This, too,

is nothing more than sheer vanity. It's like the old "Peanuts" cartoon, where Lucy throws up her hands in utter despair and shrieks: "For months we looked forward to Christmas. We couldn't wait till it came, and now it's all over!"

Even Christmas itself for many is a fraud, it would seem. For a few brief moments there appears to be a special glow in the air. Life is magic, happier, more exciting somehow. The world looks very much like an enchanted fairytale land where everybody loves everybody else and all the problems of mankind melt away in a glow of euphoria. But then the magic moment passes. The tinsel wasn't silver after all, only aluminum foil. The problems all return – sometimes larger than before – and the fun and laughter turn out to be only whistling in the dark. The warm glow of friendships restored disappears, and people become strangers once again, passing each other by on the street, unknown and unrecognized. And "God" is once again lost in the maze of all the other many pressing concerns of life.

The problem, of course, is that in its search for God, mankind is destined to fail. "God is everywhere," writes one observer, "yet He is so elusive He seems to be nowhere." But the truth is that the God who transcends and fills all things – who is everywhere, yet at times seems to be nowhere – must be apprehended only by faith – that hand whereby God lays hold of us. Faith, Paul reminds us, "is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Hence we simply believe that while the Christian faith has no universally verifiable, visible, tangible indicators which can be handled, seen, or proven beyond a shadow of doubt, yet that in no way means these things are any less real, but only that they must be believed to be received.

God has no desire for you to possess some sort of mystical faith – a faith which isn't grounded in time or in places. Nor does He want your faith to be rooted in emotion, or in your ability to transport

yourself where God is. Indeed, the God who transcends all things has couched and hidden His redemptive plan for the world in the history of the world – where real events take place for real people, in real places, in real time. And that brings us to the appointed Gospel text for this morning, where the names, titles and places Luke cites anchor this message in history. They give it flesh and blood. They make it real. Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate, Herod, Philip, Lysanias, Annas and Caiaphas were real people living in real places, who lived at a specific time, even as Jesus Christ Himself, also took on human flesh and entered our world at a particular time and place – Bethlehem, that city which was least among all the cities of Judea.

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, a little over two thousand years ago, God’s messenger, the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist broke, onto the scene. John was no a mythical character like the ancient messengers of Greek mythology. He was a contemporary of Jesus, a blood relative. As Jesus Christ once entered the world bearing the flesh of our humanity so that He might save all men from their sins, likewise John also came into this world to proclaim Christ’s coming, and to prepare for His arrival. John preached a “Baptism of repentance for the remission of sins.” His role was to announce that the long-promised Messiah had finally arrived, and that now was the time for true repentance.

John’s mission was to decrease so that Jesus could increase. It was to reveal Jesus as the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world – redeems our lost, fallen human race – and restores that relationship with God which we had destroyed by our sin and sinning. And so, like the rest of the world, you and I, during this Advent season, are also looking for God. We also would like Him to be the central focus of our life, especially during this most holy time of the year. Dear Christian, the Good News is that God does not require you to go back in time to the moment of His birth, to walk the paths Jesus and His disciples walked, or even to stand at the foot of His cross. There is no need for you to conjure up all the various emotions that might possibly make these events more real for you. For our Savior has brought the blessings of

His birth, life, suffering, cross and death to you here in this place, and at this time.

As John once preached a Baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, God has now brought you here today to be humbled before Him in a spirit of repentance as you recall how, in your Baptism, God reached down into time and space to adopt you and make you a dear child and heir of His heavenly kingdom. Even though it would be impossible for you to bridge the gap of time to receive the blessings of His cross – He has none-the-less brought those blessing here to you. He who hung upon the cross is now yours, even as His holiness and perfection are yours, for it was “in the fullness of time that God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the Law so that He might redeem those under the Law.”

Hence God uses this time and place to make Himself and His plan of redemption known to all the world. And going back to where we began, with all those difficult names and places, we next come to the 25th verse of Genesis, chapter four, which reads: “and Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and named him Seth. For God had appointed another seed for Adam in place of Abel, whom Cain killed. And as for Seth, to him also a son was born; and he named him Enoch. Then men began to call on the name of the Lord.” At that time and place God’s grace was poured out to all the world, so that later, many long years later as St. Luke records it: “Jesus Himself {would begin His} ministry at about thirty years of age, being the Son of Joseph, the Son of Enoch, the Son of Seth, the Son of Adam, the Son of God.”

Even now, dear Christian, even now, at this time and in this place, Christ is making Himself known to you again. He whom you could not find on your own has come to enter into your life – to dwell with you and be the heart and the core of your existence. That Word of God which brings you the Good News concerning the birth of His Son, also brings you the blessings of His Cross which we sang about in the words of this morning’s sermon hymn: “Oh, that birth forever blessed, When the virgin, full of grace, By the Holy Ghost conceiving, bore the Savior of our race. And the Babe, the world’s Redeemer, first revealed His sacred face, evermore and evermore.” May it always be so for you, in the name of Jesus. Amen.