

## An Ageless Promise

Dec. 4, 2005

Luke 1:5-25

I'd like to keep things simple today, this second Sunday of Advent, 2005.

We all know why we're here- and what we're here to do. This is our Sunday of Advent Communion, with all the trimmings, or really, better said for today, with just what we need for the moment.

This will be a brief sermon- in four parts, which I hope will get us ready to receive the gift God intends for us today. Because God has more good in store for us than we could ever imagine, expect or deserve.

The key to getting this message is simplicity, but it is of course not so easy to achieve at this time of year. I think we all know how our preparations for the holiday can so quickly get out of hand, and take on a life of their own. So it's best to get right down to the basics before the fullness of the season falls upon us.

The Good News of God in Jesus Christ tells us that we--each and every one of us--is not perfect and never will be. In fact, we're so far from being perfect that we really don't stand a chance on our own. But, you know what? God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life.

Over the course of this year, I've been led to the works of the poet Mary Oliver. Among those considered her finest is a poem entitled "In Blackwater Woods." In the conclusion of this poem she states what is at the very core of her being and at the center of the being of each and every one of us who embraces the Good News of God, freely given to us.

Every year everything I have ever learned in my lifetime leads back to this: the fire, and the black river of loss, whose other side is salvation, whose meaning none of us will ever know.

To live in this world you must be able to do three things: to love what is mortal; to hold it against your bones knowing your own life depends on it; and, when the time comes to let it go, to let it go.

\* To love what is mortal

\* To hold it

\* To let it go

The Mystery of Salvation is the Mystery of Time. The promise given to us by God knows no age, no time, no place. The announcement of the Advent of Jesus Christ changes everything for you and me forever.

End part one.

Part two.

Another poem I'll share- less lyrical, more narrative, puts into perspective the fact that the stories of Jesus' birth, though now popularly regarded as intended for children, actually deal primarily with *adults* as the active participants. Those who play the main roles, as I read in the scripture lesson for the day, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon and Anna, were all evidently old (for their day). The Wise Men would not have been reputed to be wise unless they were old. And, with average male life expectancy somewhere just under 40 years of age when Jesus was born, Joseph, and maybe even the shepherds, had left their Youth long ago. With this in mind- listen to the words of this poem, penned by John Bell, of the Christian Community of Iona, Scotland....

It was to older people that Jesus came, that they might know their place and learn his name, and upset notions of whom God may choose to change the world and share good news.

And this they understand who've been told of Sarah who bore a son of laughter when she was old; and Hannah who found joy despite her tears, and Naomi who blessed her later years.

With Zechariah, keen on routine, to ensure what's to come is what's always been, they may disclaim an angel's words, too, proclaiming God's intent to make things new.

Like Simeon, resigned to failing power, old age might yet become the finest hour for those who risk false claims that they're deranged by saying God wants all things changed.

For it is not in the manger Christ must stay, forever lying helpless in the hay: it is by older people Jesus is blessed, who see God's restlessness in him expressed.

End part two.

Part three. One of the greatest gifts of the Christmas season is the gift of memory, for young and old alike. Although we can never go back in time- physically- this is a season when we often find ourselves drifting back, sifting through our recollections of seasons' past, and receiving the gift of cherished memories. Our memories are surely gifts— of our early childhoods, when Christmases were wondrous and new. One Christmas stands out for me- and I share it to perhaps evoke a memory of your own, that you might hold and treasure for yourself in this tender season.

It was actually a Christmas Eve that I remember best, when I must have been 8 or 9 years old, because my Mother hadn't remarried yet, after my Father's death, when I was much younger. It must have been after the early Christmas Eve service we had gone to- because I can still picture that darkened early evening, when we set off to walk to my Aunt & Uncles' house, across the other side of the neighborhood, in my hometown in the Poconos, to join them in a Christmas Eve snack.

So we got ourselves bundled up to leave the house, the three of us, my Mother, my older brother Ed, and I; stepped out the front door, and saw the snow come down. It was, of course, the most perfect snowfall that has ever occurred, and soon the deepest. It hadn't been snowing earlier in the day, but by the time we opened the door, there was already a good inch on the ground; and it wasn't going to let up. Flakes were descending, perfectly, silently, with the evening illuminated by a bright and full moon. You know those nights, too, don't you? So we grabbed a broom and a snow shovel to clear the way for our walk, and we set off.

By the time we reached the back door of my Aunt's house- we were walking snowmen- all three of us, with a few inches of fluffy white stuff on our heads & shoulders. And before we went in for the hot chocolate- my three cousins came out, Susie, Amy & Ed- and we made the biggest & best snowmen ever made.

After finally getting inside, sitting by the fireplace & sipping some hot chocolate- we made our way back home- trudging through what must have been a foot of snow- or was it two feet by then (?)- warmed up again, and settled in for the best Xmas Eve sleep ever. Funny thing is- I haven't been able to remember what gifts I got that Xmas, though it doesn't apparently matter now--- since, clearly, the best gift I received was the memory of that glorious, still, silent night with my family- together.

End of part three.

Part four is brief—and it comes from a friend of mine, the wife of my former Associate Pastor, John Odom--Emily Enders Odom, who is also an ordained Presbyterian Minister. This is all about memories, bread, and communion.

She once shared how it was that her mother took communion- what she did with it that made it all the more special.

You all know that the sense of smell is the most powerful of the senses to evoke memory. Emily is from New York, and grew up going to the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church- what I've always pictured as a huge sanctuary, with theatre-style seating with lots of dark, strong wooden pews, deep red pew cushions, a powerful organ, all chock full of the presence of saints of God, living and deceased, who reside in, pray in, and occupy that big holy space.

Emily Enders Odom tells how her Mother taught her to take communion. As the plate was passed- as we do it, she would take that one little piece of bread, carefully, and just cup it in her hands. Just cup it & hold it, then bend down to smell it—to take in the small amount of aroma left in that little morsel, and to let it do its work.

Let it evoke what it needs to, a whiff of the bakery, perhaps, a reminder of how it was made and where it came from, a wide open wheat field with a gentle breeze blowing, bending the grain; or, perhaps, more powerfully, a call to mind of someone who needs a visit, or a phone call; or a remembrance of a loved one no longer present in body, but very needed and indeed very present – in Spirit.

For Emily, taking time to smell of the bread of God- to let it do its work-became for her the *only* way to take the sacrament. She remembered her mother teaching her how to receive it like this, sitting in the big pews of her church. And I remember watching Emily teaching her daughter Elizabeth how to take communion the same way.

So, for us to today, we have fresh scent of these trees, we have the subtle aroma of the bread- if you try hard enough, and the memory God gives us, of times past. We have the memories, the signs, the scents of the ageless promise given to us in Christ's arrival, all wrapped in this gift of God to us.

Let us recall, for ourselves, our loved ones, and those to whom we give care, the goodness God has given to us, far more than we can ever imagine, expect or deserve. Thanks be to God. Amen.