

Fourth Sunday in Advent

December 22, 2019

Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Romans 1:1-7 Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God— 2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. 5 Through him we received grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake. 6 And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. 7 To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be his holy people: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ.

“Better Than Expected”

+ Grace and peace are yours from him who is, and who was, and who is to come! +

Remember when getting an e-card was special? Or you could make your own cards on your computer and fold them up awkwardly and drop them in the mail? Maybe our hyper-digital age has helped spark a comeback for old-fashioned Christmas Cards. Sturdy paper. Colors that pop. A family picture with everyone smiling and hair combed. And if you're lucky, a personalized letter. A recap of the year. Sharing medical updates. Letting you in on silly family shenanigans. A great way to reconnect with someone you knew from long ago. Or a different side someone you see every day, but in a purely professional perspective. Cards with actual postage delivered by real mail carriers can be a pleasant surprise. Delivering more than expected.

When Paul puts quill to papyrus writing to the Christians in the city of Rome, it isn't your typical Christmas Card. We get some personal information about Paul. But it's not really an update on Paul and his personal life. The main content of his letter is the good news from God. It's all about Jesus. But when we get a peak at the introduction to this letter, you and I get to see it's also about us. Because when we focus on Jesus, that good news tell us who we are. And that news is better than expected.

As quickly as possible, the Apostle Paul gets to the meat of his message. Whenever someone reads his letter, he wants to instruct them about the true identity of Jesus. And this is pretty typical about Paul. Sometimes it happens when Paul simply mentions the name of Jesus. He is triggered like a four year old who has just been asked about his birthday party. He has to tell you everything that happened in great detail. This time Paul is a little restrained as he gushes on about Jesus. His first teaching about Jesus isn't so controversial: **“who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David.”** (Romans 1:3) There are some bare facts here that aren't really up for much debate. Jesus was born with dark skin into a Jewish family in

the geographic region of Palestine ruled by Romans about 2,000 years ago. His ancestors traced their heritage back to the ultimate hero from their history, King David.

But the Apostle Paul wants to draw our attention to something bigger than a royal family line or potential political leader. Jesus came from a long line of God's promise in action. The entire Bible as they had it at that time was coming to fulfillment in Jesus. Everything written by Moses, poetic greatness condensed, prophecies concentrated together in the coming of **"Jesus Christ our Lord."** (Romans 1:4) But there is something shocking about the way all those promises came to fulfillment. After telling us about the non-controversial part, Paul continues: **"and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power."** (Romans 1:4) When this Christmas card comes in the mail, it's hard to know what to do with it.

Think of it this way. Mary and Joseph both had their entire lives turned upside down by the news of Jesus' birth. As we read about the angel appearing to Mary in Luke chapter one or the angelic herald coming to Joseph in Matthew chapter one, we picture serene and peaceful scenes. But that's just fanciful images placed in our heads by artists. Both Mary and Joseph naturally wanted to say "no thanks, I'll pass" to the angel. Joseph, just picture him taking to heart to words from the angel of the Lord and wanting to hop into his truck, pull his hat down as far over his eyes as would allow him to drive, and then take off for Texas or the mountains of Colorado or the uninhabited parts of Utah. Mary wanted to crawl under a rock every time she made a public appearance. Every time one of her high school friends came home over break telling impressive tales about their future plans, Mary would have to use every ounce of courage not to just burst into tears because of the way her future had been hijacked. Mary and Joseph were faithful believers of the Old Testament promises penned by the prophets. But this announcement is not what they expected.

The long-ago-promised Jesus still comes as a shock to our world. The promises of old and fulfillment in the Son of God and Son of David cause you and me to question what exactly we were expecting. As we get ready to greet Jesus we anticipate all the things he could add to our lives. And we reason that even if Jesus was just a fairy tale, he could teach us a lesson. His special character could help me be a better person and treat other people with respect. Jesus could enrich my life with great experiences, power me to reach my potential. But the descendant of David and Son of God won't allow that. Jesus brings confrontation. Confronts us with a personal crisis.

Driving in the car this past week, I listened to an interview that was part of a series called "Native Braids." Young people get to ask their elders all the questions they've always wanted to ask. This grandmother had lots of good stories. But she wrapped it up by saying 'Don't have babies until you're ready. Do all the other stuff first. And if you think you're ready for a baby, get a cactus. And when you can take care of the cactus, get a plant, then a puppy. Then when you're ready, have a child. It's another human life!' Babies throw our lives into chaos. They make you put your own needs on the back burner to help this little one just survive. And then hopefully to thrive.

The Gospel Paul presents to us in Romans is an intrusion in our lives. You are never ready for it. You're never prepared enough. The message of God's Son born of Mary comes as good news. Yet Jesus comes to us unrealistic, inconceivable to our minds, unplanned by human understanding. Yet this amazing, miraculous good news of Jesus is life-transforming. It is not just some random offer coming in the mail that you can toss aside or put in a pile with all the other mail to sort through later. The coming of Jesus is how we receive God's grace. It is for you.

If we only hear from old friends or extended family members once or twice each year, they will probably hit the highlights. Focus on their travels or work promotions. Accomplishments of their children. Even if nothing monumental has taken place, they will give you an update the children are another year older and involved in activities and advancing to the next grade level.

Paul breaks that mold. Paul has been confronted by the good news of Jesus. His life has been transformed by God's grace. Paul transitions quickly from his own credentials to what he is doing. The gospel is his chief preoccupation. Delivering and sharing that good news of Jesus is his life's focus. The goal of his life was to get a hearing for Jesus. Sharing the Word of God was always aimed at getting a responsive hearing of faith. That's probably the better way to understand **"the obedience that comes from faith"** that Paul describes here in Romans chapter one. (Romans 1:5) He shares the message of Jesus so people will listen and then respond appropriately. His prayer is always that people believe the announcement of what happened when Jesus came to this earth. By believing they will accept the message and trust the good news.

But who is that good news for? Who needs to receive this message? One of the biggest problems that messes up our expectations this time of year is people. It's no wonder some people would rather share their time with a Wookiee or some people believe reindeer are better than people. Family members intrude on holiday plans at the worst times. Bosses schedule overtime when you have the least amount of flexibility. Children get sick when you are already running behind.

Christmas says people aren't the obstacles to God's plans. They are the objects. People are the entire reason why Jesus came to down to us in a mind-blowing way in the first place. Christmas says God came to earth for messed up people. Jesus descended for his children who can't get their act together. Jesus was born for our neighbors we would probably overlook.

Jesus came for people like Joseph. Jesus was born for people like Mary. And you and me. Jesus had to come in an unexpected way so he could shatter all our inferior expectations of what he should do. Romans tells us Jesus had to be more than just a descendant from the royal line of David. His identity as God is confirmed in the most faith-confronting kind of way: **"who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead."** (Romans 1:4) The best, most powerful affirmation of the identity of Jesus as God comes from his resurrection. The power of Good News flows out of

Jesus' defeat of death by his own death. His body beaten and mangled, resurrected in glory is the ultimate hope for God's people.

And because Jesus was not what was expected by Mary or Joseph, by kings or religious authorities of his day, Jesus can be so much better than what anyone would expect. Isaiah told King Ahaz and then the angel told Joseph this baby born of a virgin would be Immanuel, God with us.

Just think how often people talk about Jesus at Christmas. Many people will acknowledge the holiday began by celebrating Jesus. Most even recognize Christmas started with the birth of Jesus. But how do they see Jesus? Good news of having a good example of humility. Good news of living life sacrificially. Good news of God's loving acceptance of all their life choices. For none of those things did we need God to become human, born in a manger. We need God with us, the infinite divine power incarnate in fragile form to save us. Jesus knows your darkness, because he came into this world to battle the forces of darkness. Jesus is with you in your moments of doubt and weakness, because he faced humanity's greatest foe with absolute courage. Jesus is there with you in your grief, because he overcame the heartbreak of rejection and betrayal. Jesus is there with you in your joy, because there is no greater joy than what Jesus accomplished on your behalf. Jesus is there with you in your celebrations, because there is nothing more impressive than the eternal life he made possibly by his resurrection.

God with us is the Good News that God wrote you into His Christmas card. Paul's letter is all about the Good News of Jesus. But Jesus is all about you. You are called to be among God's people. You are loved with the same selfless love that sent Jesus into this world. You are God's holy people, cleansed by the blood of Jesus. From Jesus you have grace, the completely unearned and unpaid for good will of God. Through Jesus you have peace with God, health and wholeness in your relationship with him that flows over into your other relationships.

Everyone has their own Christmas traditions. Even ones that aren't written down or recorded, but just become habit. Some families wait until Christmas Eve to do anything Christmas related. Other people have mini-Christmases scattered throughout the month of December - parents, aunties, step-mom, vacation getaway. As the calendar marches closer to December 25th and the count down transitions from days to hours, God wants to build into our hearts a steady anticipation for Jesus. Our souls swell with a mighty crescendo of the good news that is ours because Jesus is our Immanuel. God is with us in Jesus. And because that good news tells us we are His, this Christmas is guaranteed to be better than expected. Amen.

+ May our Lord Jesus Christ himself and God our Father, who loved us and by his grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and work. Amen. +