



Redeemer Lutheran Church

of Leisure World

13564 St. Andrews Drive

Seal Beach, CA 90740

Phone (562) 598-8697; FAX (562) 598-8697

e-mail: redeemer_lutheran@verizon.net

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Reflections on WORSHIP and DISCIPLESHIP

by Margo Geesing

A quick note at the beginning of this article. The Rev. Murray D. Finck, Bishop Emeritus of the Pacifica Synod, is actually going to go off book and do a six-week series looking at the early years of Jesus and the influence of Joseph starting the 1st Sunday of Advent and going through the January 7th Service. This will be a special opportunity to look into the life of Jesus's silent parent, Joseph. We do not hear a lot about him in the Gospels nor do we talk a lot about him but as the male parent in Jesus's life on earth, he would have had a great influence on him. Since at this writing, I do not know what Gospel references he will be using, I am just going to look at the set Gospels during this time. You can look on previous page[s] to find the Gospel lessons for each week.

“Advent to Christmas”

December is here and we begin a new Church Year with the lessons coming from Cycle B: the Gospel of Mark. Mark is probably the first Gospel that was written. It is the shortest and to the point. There's no set up, no background material Mark just jumps in at the beginning of Jesus's public ministry. It ends with the women being told that Jesus has been raised. Nothing else. There is a longer ending which includes, briefly, a couple of Jesus's appearances, the commissioning of the eleven, and the ascension – a mere 12 verses. During Mark's Gospel Jesus is doing, all the time. Jesus is healing, telling stories, and feeding people. It's like a highlight reel at the end of the year. The overall focus of Mark is that the Kingdom of God is coming and we need to be building for that. Jesus also could be seen as being combative with the Jewish power structure.

The first Sunday in December's Gospel from Mark is full of dire portents but, we as Californians understand the power of Mother Nature as we face floods, earthquakes, wildfires, and drought. But just as we face natural disasters, we also prepare and watch for signs of them. This is what we are also called to do as we prepare for Christmas: watch for signs of God in our own lives and be ready.

The second Sunday of Advent we hear from John the Baptist in the Gospel of Mark. He is the herald of Jesus. He called the faithful to repentance and warns them of the one to come. It used to be that you would see signs that said, *“Jesus is coming. Look busy.”* I never really liked it but it had a point. But I saw a new one: *“One does not simply look busy for Jesus.”* which I like much better. We don’t need to look busy preparing for Jesus but we need to BE busy preparing for Jesus.

The third Sunday of Advent we hear a similar story of John the Baptist but from the Gospel of John. It shows a confrontation between the priests, Levites, and the Pharisees and John. I really think that smart answers to authorities that are being stupid just runs in that family [Jesus and John the Baptist are cousins]. Because when asked who he was, John didn’t give a direct answer but rather quoted from Isaiah. He also basically told them that they were unaware since, *“Among you stands one whom you do not know...”* [John 1:26]. We frequently have sassy Jesus but we also have sassy John.

The fourth Sunday of Advent we would normally get a Gospel from Luke about the annunciation. This is an important moment in our faith story: a young girl said yes to God’s plan. Because we all have free will, including Mary, she could have said no. And her response is so calm, *“How can this be, since I am a virgin?”* After the angel explains what will happen, she again responds with devotion to God, *“Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”* I don’t think I would have been very calm about this. But, because of that “yes” we have our own faith journey where we also get to say yes to God’s plan for our lives. I just hope we can all answer as calmly and devotedly as Mary.

Instead, we are going to celebrate Christmas on the fourth Sunday of December. We will be hearing the Gospel of Luke and the birth of Jesus and the announcement to the shepherds. I don’t know about you, but I always hear this, no matter who is reading it, in Linus Van Pelt’s voice from **A Charlie Brown’s Christmas**. It is the first announcement of Jesus’s birth and it wasn’t to great and powerful people. It was to humble shepherds. Jesus’s whole ministry was to the poor, downtrodden, powerless, and outcast people; why not announce his birth to those same people. Jesus was born in a stable. He was born to humble parents. When we chase after power and wealth, rather than using our power and wealth to help others we are doing the opposite of what Jesus stood for.

The fifth and final Sunday in December we have the presentation of Jesus at the Temple. There was the custom that the first-born male child was presented to God. There were two very old people, Simeon and Anna, at the Temple. These were people who had waited their whole lives to see this miracle. They had obviously been told by the Holy Spirit that they would be witnesses to this. Simeon was so contented by this gift that he praised God by stating that the fulfillment of his life was done. This Gospel reminds us all that Jesus and his parents were Jewish and devout in their own faith, following the rites and rituals. It is also a reminder to us that our own faith is rooted in the Jewish faith. Our forefather was also Abraham. Our faith journey began thousands of years ago and continues today and through us, onward into the future.

“They Grow Up So Fast”

The first Sunday in January is officially the Baptism of Our Lord but we are also celebrating the Epiphany of Our Lord. At Christmas we had Jesus presented to the lowly in the presence of the shepherds. Last Sunday we had Jesus presented to the Jewish people in the Temple and through Simeon and Anna. This week we have Jesus presented to the world and the powerful in the Magi and the knowledge of King Herod. Each group reacted differently. Much of their reaction was based on who they were. The shepherds reacted with fear and then with excitement. Simeon and Anna reacted with joy, completion, and need to proclaim it to others. The Magi reacted with joy and humbleness. King Herod reacted with jealousy and fear. I think it depends on how you relate to Jesus how his birth affects you. Also, our reactions can change over time.

The Baptism of Our Lord is the public demonstration that he is starting a new phase of his life, his public ministry. He did not need John's baptism. He did not need to repent. In fact, John was heralding Jesus's coming with a new baptism. Rather, Jesus did this because he chose to be human. He lived as a human being and experienced life as we do. At Jesus's baptism we hear that the voice of the Father says, *“You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”* Because of Jesus's life, death, and resurrection we, too, at our own baptism, were welcomed into that same family with Jesus.

The second week of January we hear from the Gospel of John and the calling of the first disciples. The interesting thing is that Jesus does no persuading or explaining, although he does answer Nathanael's question. He just says, follow me. How many of us would follow some random guy who says, follow me; even if someone we trusted said he was a good person? We would have questions. Why? Where are we going? What are we doing? Who are you? But that isn't what happens here. Nathanael comes out with a declaration of faith instead. This is why Jesus is different. Those who follow him see that difference. We see beyond the human and see the divine. We may not know exactly where we are going or what we will be doing or everything about Jesus; but we are willing to find out. To follow. To come and see. It will not be easy but always interesting!

The third Sunday after Epiphany we have our first declaration of the Kingdom of God, *“The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near, repent, and believe in the good news.”* and another version of the calling of the disciples from the Gospel of Mark. Jesus's message is the same as John the Baptist's: repent and believe. Again, people are just dropping their lives and following Jesus. It's crazy. There's no detail in the thought process for any of these people. Maybe it was time for a change for them. Maybe they were tired of fishing. Maybe they were ready for a new adventure. The thing is, Jesus calls each of us in a unique way, at different points in our lives, and for different reasons. Each of us answers that call in our own way. Some are called to change their lives completely. Some are called to live their lives more completely. Some are called to simply live lives of faithful devotion where they are and as they are. The thing is, each of us are called and each of us answer in a unique way. We cannot and should not judge which are better or worse; that's God's job. What we can and should do is live our lives answering that call every day and helping others to do the same.

The last Sunday in January we have two moments of Jesus's authority. The first is within the synagogue. He taught with authority. He used words. He obviously said something new or unusual; we are not told what it was, but it was something that people had to comment on and be amazed. The second was still in the synagogue but was an action. He commanded the unclean spirit that was torturing a man to come out and it did. Jesus was not just a man of words but also a man of actions. He taught much; usually in parables; but he also did things. He healed, fed, and touched people. His words and actions are in sync. His word **and** actions **are** the transforming message. We can say we are people of faith. We can say we are Christians. What we do tells about our faith and what it means to be a Christian. It is through hope and grace that our words and actions are in sync and send a transforming message to others.