

LET THERE BE PEACE

2SAMUEL 7:1-11, 16; LUKE 1:26-38

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The spiritual challenge of Advent waiting is distraction. A few years ago devout Lutheran John Updike tweaked his readers with what he called the twelve terrors of Christmas.

Santa the Man, loose-fitting nylon beard, fake optical twinkle, cheap red suit; *Santa the concept*, why would anyone half normal want to stay up all night delivering presents of dubious deservingness? Isn't there a point where altruism becomes sick? *Santa's helpers*, what is really going on here anyway? Elves in sweatshops, what are they getting out of it? On and on Updike goes with his searing wit and literary panache commenting on Christmas Muzak, TV specials, wood-bore infested Tannenbaums, and fears of not getting or giving enough.ⁱ

Distractions *are* a challenge not to mention that deep within us we know Christmas is somehow supposed to be more simple, free, uncomplicated and childlike than we seem to make it.

So I invite us this morning to shed some perennial distractions, close though we are to Christmas Day. I invite us to reflect on where the Advent journey leads us this morning.

Today's story from 2 Samuel is not one we associate with the season. David, King of Israel, having established his reign over the land now offers to do something great for God. Offers to build the Lord a house or temple. But David is distracted.

God knew what David's handlers were loathe to admit. Building a temple for the Lord was self-serving, would boost David's popularity rating. Not that he was unpopular. But, you see, David had something to gain. Like the head of any organization that undertakes a building project, David knew building God's house would embellish his reputation. So God turns the tables. God says, "Don't worry about building me a house, David. I'm too big to fit into anything you might construct. Rather, I will build of you and your name a great house." Clever holy word play. God refers, of course, to Jesus the future cornerstone of the house of David.

It is a wonderfully human story. Our own expectations and egos do get wrapped up with our best intentions. God is too big to fit into our small mindedness. Who here can't relate to David? So if the first challenge of Advent is shedding self-serving distractions this season, the second is embracing the message embodied in Gabriel's word to Mary.

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High...and of his kingdom there will be no end."

Here's the remarkable thing. The great Lord, creator of the universe, who hung the stars in the heavens and set the planets spinning in their courses, this great God chooses to come to us as a baby. And not just a baby but a peasant baby. It is a message that challenges every urbane, responsible and adult fiber in us. Luke asks Mary and you and me today to consider something so foolish and absurd our adult minds revolt.

The core message we are invited to embrace today is this: if God gets small at Christmas...so must we. Jesus said “unless you become like a child you cannot enter the kingdom of heaven.” What better time than Christmas to become a child again!

There is a wonderful scene in William Faulkner’s *Intruder in the Dust*, a story about a black man falsely accused of killing a white man in Mississippi in the 1930s. The black man knows what it will take to prove his innocence. But he also knows no one will believe him. No one, that is, except a child and an old woman. So he enlists the child who enlists the old woman to his cause. Then the old woman after signing on says to the boy, she says, “he knew it would take a child, or an old woman like me, someone not concerned with probability and evidence. Men like your uncle and the sheriff have had to be men too long, busy too long.”ⁱⁱ

Faulkner and Luke agree. There are some things in life that our distracted, prejudiced, adult minds are ill-equipped to comprehend. The innocence of a black man in Mississippi in 1934. God’s coming to us as a peasant baby. How could it be? What does it mean? One preacher says Gabriel’s announcement to Mary suggests the kingdom of God has a very small door. Like the children’s door at FAO Schwarz toy store. You can’t get in unless you lower yourself, become a child. Like Isaiah’s words etched in granite at the entrance to our playground, “a little child shall lead them.”

This is not a new message. But it is an important one that bears repeating again and again so sophisticated and busy we have become. This is the season to let go of our adult pretensions and importance and control. Perhaps you saw the touching story of a young man by the name of Jake Porter who lives in southern Ohio. Jake has Fragile X Syndrome, which is the most common inherited cause of mental retardation among boys.

Jake goes to special-needs classes at Northwest High School in the small town of McDermott. His true love is sports, especially football. Every day after school he suits up and goes to practice. At first he needed help from his teammates to get ready, but he has learned how to pull up his pants, tie his shoes and look tough.

Jake actually got to play in one football game a year ago. He was put in for one play, took a knee, and everybody cheered. He talked about that game a lot. His coach wanted to try again this year.

About a month ago, Northwest played its last home game against a powerful team from Waverly. Everyone knew Waverly would thump Northwest, and early in the game it was apparent that they would. Jake’s coach wanted to get him in for one play, so he talked to the other coach about it, who said it would be fine.

With a few seconds left, and Waverly winning 42-0, the Northwest coach called time out. He and the Waverly coach met at mid-field and talked for a long while. Everyone could see both of them shaking their heads, “no, yes, no, yes.” The meeting broke up. Jake’s coach returned and said, “OK Jake, get in the game.”

Jake rushed out on the field. He was supposed to get the ball, go down on one knee and that would be it. Jake got the ball, but he didn’t exactly take one knee. He sort of curtsied. Jake took a few steps forward and started to go back toward his teammates. But the whistle hadn’t blown to indicate the play was over.

Then Jake saw them all pointing – not just his teammates but the players from the other team as well. They were pointing to the end zone. That’s when Jake started to run. He ran and ran, 50 yards all the way into the end zone. When he got there he jumped up and down, pumping his arm. The Northwest players were cheering, the Waverly players were cheering. The crowd was going crazy. Waverly and Northwest fans cheered and danced and cried.

Jake’s mother remembering the moment said, “Suddenly there weren’t two teams out there. Everybody was on the same team.” After the game Jake’s mom found the Waverly coach, whom she had never met before. It turns out that at the meeting at mid-field between the coaches the Waverly coach insisted Jake not just get in the game, but that he score. They hugged, and through her tears she said, “Thank you.” “No,” said the coach, “Thank *you* for letting us be a part of this.”ⁱⁱⁱ

How does this compare to, say, winning the Super Bowl? Those players, those coaches, those fans, certainly Jake will never forget that game and what they all received that night. It won’t be about what they achieved but about the gift they were given.

We adults get so distracted in this life keeping score, marking achievement, winning and not losing. So distracted that unless we become like children we run the risk of spiritual emptiness and death.

But if we become like children, if we open our hearts to the new thing God is about to do in our world Christmas Day, if like those high school football coaches and players and fans we can see the possibility of setting aside our rules for keeping track and keeping score and keeping up then you and I stand a chance of being transformed.

It could happen anywhere, anytime. Do you think what happened in that stadium to all those people when Jake ran all the way has the power to change a heart? You bet it does. Does it have the power to heal broken relationships? No question. Could it happen in other arenas, bring peace to our world, end hatred, eliminate violence? That’s the promise contained in Gabriel’s song to Mary we are asked to make room in our hearts for today.

Six months after Gabriel’s visit, when Mary went to see her cousin Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist the two women, each with child, greeted one another and Mary said, “the Mighty One has done great things for me, holy is his name. He has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly; filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.”

At the heart of our culture is the story that the only way to get smart and become wise is to be powerful and important and objective and detached. At the heart of the Christian faith is the story that the only way to become wise is to become small and return to the child within: open, dependent, vulnerable before God, who sees wonder and mystery and miracles in everyday.

This morning when we baptized another boy named Jake we did so in the spirit and with the trust that Jesus who said, “let the children come to me,” loves not only the children in our midst...but the child in each of us waiting to be liberated this holy, precious season of year. Amen.

Endnotes:

ⁱ John Updike, "The Twelve Terrors of Christmas," The New Yorker, December 1992.

ⁱⁱ William Faulkner, Intruder In The Dust (New York: Vintage International, 1948) 89.

ⁱⁱⁱ Joe Posnanski, Kansas City Star, October 2002. Used by The Rev. Dr. Peter W. Shidemantle, November 3, 2002 in sermon entitled, "The Gift of Humility," preached at Pebble Hill Presbyterian Church.