

THE OBEDIENCE OF FAITH

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 18, 2022

Readings: Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25; Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Sermon text: Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. Romans 1:5

Christmas is closing in—this is the last Sunday of Advent. Our readings include the story of how Joseph took the news of his fiancé Mary's pregnancy—though they had yet to be formally married and consummate the marriage. Our first reading contains Isaiah's prophecy to King Ahaz that a young woman would bear a child to be called Immanuel, God with us, and that by the time he was weaned the threat of the besieging enemies of Judah would be gone. Stay strong, hope is on the way. This prophecy, whose word for young woman in Hebrew was translated into a word that connotes both young woman and virgin in Greek—hence the prophetic fulfillment noted by Matthew in the case of the Virgin Mary. Joseph is told in a dream that it is true—the child was miraculously conceived by the Holy Spirit and he will be a savior to his people—hence the name Jesus, one who saves. Joseph and Mary stay together, no quiet divorce.

Now there are **two core truths in Christian doctrine**: one is summed up in the phrase “**God is with us, Immanuel.**” The other in the acclamation, “**Christ is risen, the Lord is risen indeed.**” **One is Christmas, one is Easter.**

This world is more than a pageant of material forces randomly interacting, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. On the contrary, our sense that there is purpose, beauty, truth are intuitions of a divine creator, of more to this world than is contained in a materialist philosophy. God is with us, calling us, directing, to a higher truth and a better world.

And the second truth is even more ultimate and transcendent: this life is not the only life. God's life is eternal and inclusive of all creation, and the sign and proof of that is the resurrection of Jesus. We do not know the details, we cannot know what is beyond our capacity to understand, but we get glimpses, we feel connected to the living and the dead, we understand not only a cycle of new life from old but a continuation, a growing of our personal life into the life of God, into eternal life, through the singular example of the risen Christ, who gives us hope beyond all suffering and tragedy and the often apparent defeat of the

forces of good in this life. It means there is justice for those whose lives were cut short or for all who still have much left to fulfill on our journey to becoming the person God created you to be. There will be small deaths of the self along the way—there will be defeats of the good by the manifold forces of evil arrayed against it—but in the end love wins.

This is our faith: God is with us and Christ is risen; we are a Christmas and Easter people.

So what does Paul mean when he writes to the new Christians in Rome that he was called to be apostle to them, to Gentiles, in order to bring them into “the obedience of faith”?

The obedience of faith. I was struck by this phrase as I reflected on this week’s readings. Now Paul, introducing himself, writes in the long opening sentence about himself that he Paul, is “a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ.”

Here we see that Paul is unconcerned that Jesus was descended according to the flesh from David—because he was declared to be the Son of God through the power of his resurrection. And Paul when he became a believer—after his famous encounter with the risen Christ on the road to Damascus—received grace and the mandate to be an apostle—a messenger or proclaimer of the gospel—in order as he put it to bring about the obedience of faith for all Gentiles—including those in Rome in the year 64 and those here now, us, who also belong to Jesus, who are also called beloved saints.

And what I asked myself was this: am I, and have I been obedient to the faith and hope that is in me? If I believe that God is with us and Christ is risen do I cash that out in the currency of action? The word obedient—not much in vogue as an ethical good these days, like the cognate word duty—is from the Latin *obedire*, to listen. To hear the word and the call of God—and to respond. To be a doer of the word not just a hearer, as St James writes in his letter. To hear and to

answer to that sense of duty we feel which we have been taught—to be true to ourselves, and kind to others, to strive for the good and never give up, to do all those things that can sound hokey and old fashioned, like James Stewart and Donna Reed in *It's a Wonderful Life*. But this is the truth. This is the choice—the daily choice—the daily visitation of the Holy spirit as our opening collect puts it, that we must practice in order to prepare ourselves to be the mansion or welcoming room for Christ when he comes again. Loose finial on the newel post of the stairway and all.

As I was writing this sermon at the desk at home I noticed next to my computer a card from the funeral of a young man Josh Hermson, who was the son of a colleague of my wife. Let me tell you a little about Josh.

He was born on December 11 1995—and had his first heart transplant 8 months later. His second when he was eight. He never grew too tall but he was smart and made friends—and was fiercely loved by family and friends. Despite having long stretches in the hospital he graduated from high school and then at 25 from Marist College. But his body betrayed him—his third transplant was in February of 2021 and he died in July of this year, age 27. The line at his memorial reception was hours long—in the pouring rain—and along the hall cards and pictures and quotes illustrated the tremendous impact he made on so many of his peers and elders. This memorial card shows him sitting with his dog looking over a stream—and includes some of his writings to friends. Let me quote:

“Never waste time. Chase every dream that you have and understand that anyone who calls you dumb is probably too scared to do it themselves. Always do the right thing, Don't look externally for validation...”

If you are looking for one, this is your wake up call. I'm asking you to be happy with who you are but to always try to be better. Because that is all we can do for ourselves and our fellow person.”

“I don't believe I am done yet, but on the off chance that my stop is coming up, I have one straightforward request for you. If I have ever, in any way, shape or form, EVER affected your life for better, pay it forward. Fight for anyone and everyone you can, especially those who can't fight for themselves or need your voice to help pick them up. Be there for your friends, Be there for your acquaintances.”

I don't know how that card came to be right next to my computer—I asked Mary if she put it there and she said no. I guess it was among my mess of papers and had gotten uncovered by accident. Or maybe not by accident. Maybe by the finger of God, who wanted to remind me and then through this sermon you that a life is not measured by its length but by its impact. and its impact is not measured simply by numbers affected but by the depth of the love it made, the example it showed. There may only be a week left to do some more shopping for Christmas gifts to friends and family. But you have the rest of your life to be a friend, to fight for what's right and true, to be obedient to your faith.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

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