

December 29, 2013

It is a rare thing for me to be here on the Sunday after Christmas. Usually I take this Sunday off. But not this year. This occurred to me when I was thinking back to past sermons that I might have preached on this Sunday between Christmas and New Year's. There are none. This is my first.

This day begs an interesting question.

What good news do we need to hear on this day?

It is a strange day, awkwardly lodged between Christmas and the New Year. Christmas is over, but the new year has not yet begun. An in-between day.

But you know, when it comes right down to it, all our days are in-between days.

Every day we live is a day that falls rather awkwardly between Jesus' birth and the time when he comes again. We celebrate the arrival of a king, and yet confess that his kingdom is not quite here yet. We look backwards and forwards at the same time, remembering where we have been so that we can have some sense of where we are going.

This begs an even more interesting question.

What in-between days are we in, here in the Calamus Lutheran Parish? What past and future are we caught between? More specifically, where have you been this past year, not necessarily physically, but spiritually, emotionally, mentally? To be sure, there have been good times and bad.

There have been the best of times and the worst. There have been deaths and births and graduations and baptisms. There have been confirmations and weddings and recognitions. New jobs, old jobs, no jobs. There have been break ups and first dates. There have been beautiful words spoken; there have been devastating words spoken. Some old wounds have healed, while some fresh ones have been cut. This is but a sampling of where and who we have been. And now we are one year older, all of us, and we reflect on who we've been, what we've said, what we've done. Are we proud? Or do we cringe? We are caught between who we've been and who we want to be.

Every year, no matter how great, has tough times. Our past year together has had its share of tough times. And yet, you are strong people. I am a strong person. We have all been through much worse than this past year. And so as we look towards a new year, I think optimistically but not naively of one word—healing.

But just how does healing happen? They say “time heals all wounds.” In part, that is very true. But time can't heal a wound if the wound keeps getting picked at and reopened. Part of healing is knowing when to leave something alone, to let go of something, and to commend it to God's care. This is tough, it is something we can all work on. We'd rather reopen where we've been than focus on where we're going.

Healing also inevitably means a scar is left behind. Some scars are tiny and almost invisible. I had my gall bladder out 3 years ago, and would be hard pressed to find those teeny scars. But I also had back surgery 17 years ago, and that left a visible 7 inch scar on my back, which I myself cannot see...I am only reminded of its presence when others ask me about it or if I catch a glimpse of it in the mirror. Some fresh wounds heal quickly; others leave thick, tough scars. The same is true of emotional, mental or spiritual scars. Scars remind us that we are caught, in-between being wounded and being whole.

Some scars fade away nearly entirely. Others we forget about until others remind us. Healing does not mean pretending something never happened. Healing means letting a wound close up. It means learning from the past and moving into the future.

God's people have always known this and always struggled with it...it's because we have always lived in a strange in-between time...in between the arrival of the infant king and the completion of his kingdom. We yearn for the heaven which God promises, and yet, we are knee deep in the muck of this life. That's why healing is so hard....because no matter how hard we try to let something go, we cannot forget the pain.

This is true of every generation of human beings since God first exhaled into Adam's dusty lungs. The Bible is packed full of example after example of God carrying his people into the future, because they were too crippled by the past to walk for themselves. Think of Lot's wife, a perfect example of the catastrophic result of looking backwards when you should instead look ahead to where God is leading you next.

Isaiah also offers beautiful imagery of this.

In this morning's reading, Isaiah reminds God's despairing people of his promise to become their savior, right in the middle of all their distress....and more than that, God didn't send an angel or a messenger to save them from the pain of their past and the futility of their present, but God himself came to carry them into his future...God's own presence saved them, in his love and pity he redeemed them, he lifted them up and carried them, all the days of old. God carried his people from their past into their future; he carried them during their despairing in-between days, during those dark generations between his promise to give them a king and the actual arrival of Jesus.

And God continues to do all those things.

God continues to come to us, in these awkward in-between days, in this days when we can't seem to let go of the past and step into the future, where we straddle two worlds—one world rejoices in hurting and killing one another, the other world promises freedom from pain and death...and we have one foot in each. In between worlds, in-between days.

Even the Christmas story offers proof of this in-between time. We have *just* rejoiced with the angels and the shepherds over the arrival of the newborn king Jesus the Christ, who has come into our world in order to one day save us from eternal death. We have just declared that he is the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies. We confess him to the very Son of God, the Savior of our sinful world, Prince of Peace. And yet...

...and yet, in our Gospel, we read about the mass murder of baby boys, killed at the hand of King Herod, who, in a jealous fit, tries his best to wipe out the baby Jesus by having all baby boys murdered. This doesn't sound much like heaven on earth, does it? I mean, shouldn't Jesus' birth have erased all human bloodlust? Shouldn't the world be perfect now that the Prince of Peace has come to us?

It should be. But it's not. Not yet, anyway.

It will be. Ours is so very clearly still an imperfect, broken world. We are all walking wounded, in so very many different ways. Jesus' birth hasn't seemed to have changed that. Our present time doesn't seem to have been impacted by Jesus' birth at all.

But maybe our present time *has* been impacted by Jesus' birth, in that there is now one thing that we did not have before...and that is hope.

We have hope for a future that has already begun, a future that will unfold completely before our very eyes and we will have no words to describe its beauty. The

days of hurting and wounding one another will be over. Let us not remind each other of the scars that are behind us. Instead, may God give us the strength to look forward into an undeserved future, a chance to begin all over again. And the days of true healing will begin. 2014 is one year closer to God's completed kingdom, a future that is spinning towards us at a blinding speed, a future that belongs to every single wounded person caught in these in-between days, a future that began long ago, unsuspectingly, in a little stable in Bethlehem.