

Sermon by Theology Doctoral Student H. Ashley Hall  
Third Sunday after Epiphany  
27 January 2008

Isaiah 9:1-4  
Psalm 27: 1, 4-9  
1 Corinthians 1:10-18  
Matthew 4: 12-23

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

My good friend Christopher has a refrigerator magnet. On the magnet is an image of our Lord — in a pose and likeness very similar to the one here above our altar. Below this image is a caption which reads “Jesus is coming! Look busy.”

This phrase of course has a ring of truth to it. We as Christians believe that there will be day of Judgment, as we confess in the Creeds. Toward the end of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus declares in stark tones how he will condemn the unrepentant and the arrogant; those who ignore the cries of the needy and mock the judgment of God.

But here, at the beginning of Matthew’s gospel — which was read today — we are not presented with a bill by an angry creditor. Rather, Jesus begins his gospel message with a proclamation of amnesty. The first words of the public ministry of Jesus were “Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.” That is, “change your ways, for the kingdom of God is in now among you.” Jesus announces that God has acted, God has drawn near, God has entered into our midst. In return, God requires first and foremost not valiant deeds of piety nor scrupulous religiosity. Rather, God asks of us repentance and humility.

Ultimately, then, the first and foremost message of Jesus is an invitation to joy. This joy is three fold. First, we notice the joy experienced by God in proclaiming the message. God has delighted to take up human flesh and dwell among us. God’s righteousness consists in fulfilling his promises. Psalm 27 recounts how God embraces the happy burden of demonstrating his love. The psalmist writes “For in the day of trouble [God] shall keep me safe in his shelter, he shall hide me in the secrecy of his dwelling and set me high upon a rock. Even now he lifts up my head above my enemies round about me.”

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he records

one of the earliest hymns of the Christian church. This hymn is a celebration of God love for humanity now manifested in Christ. Paul writes:

Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant . . . And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.

God embraces the cross. He willingly suffered for our sake. It is through God’s embrace of humility that God reveals his power.

God is a kind of fool for love. In today’s reading of the letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes “the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” It does seem to be foolish indeed for God to have set aside his glory and power in order to live a humble life of service and to die on a cross. One wants to shout in unison with Peter when Jesus foretold his own death: “God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” It is as if one could say “You are God! Don’t you have any respect for yourself?” Thankfully, God has ignored our counsel. God shows his power in humble service to each and every one of us. By taking up human flesh and conquering death, God in Christ has claimed every single human person as an adopted child. Such is God’s power. Such is God’s foolish love.

Second, we are invited to experience this love in our own lives. We are invited to joyful exuberance because, far from judgment, God has offered reconciliation. If happiness in this life and salvation in the next depends solely on our abilities and deeds, then we are surely doomed. God,

however, was not content to sit back and observe our struggles. God does not ruefully make an accounting of our failures. Instead, God has shown the strength of his hand by bringing to each of us a message of peace and love. And was it not foretold in Luke's account of the annunciation of the birth of Christ to the shepherds? There is it said that they saw a multitude of the army of the Lord, an army sent to declare "Glory to God in the highest, and peace on earth, good will to all."

We are invited to join our song to that of the psalmist, who declared "I will offer in God's dwelling an oblation with sounds of great gladness; I will sing and make music to the Lord." Like the lands of Zebulun and Naphtali, who had once languished under the fear of God's retributive justice, we too are invited to "rejoice before God as with joy at the harvest" because God has broken the "rod of the oppressor."

Finally, we are invited to share this love with one another. I say "invited" because true joy and love need no command. They flow forth naturally. Elsewhere in scripture we are invited to "love others as we have been loved." This is easier said than done. Some people are not easy to love. We ourselves have not always mastered the pride that keeps love at a distance; which whispers in our ears, "That person is not worthy of my love and respect" or fears "what if my love is not returned?"

We heard this morning that the Christian community at Corinth was racked by internal strife, competing forces for authority which nearly destroyed the unity of that church. We do not know, but it is very likely that the leaders of these various factions (such as Apollos or Cephas) were not inherently evil people intent on destroying the Church. They very well might have been good and earnest Christians with very real and well-founded differences on how best to love the Lord and one another. Is this not what real Christian community is like?

In responding, Paul has modeled the humility and servitude of Christ. Paul is certainly angry at the community, Paul certainly has some very clear ideas about how they should behave. But notice what Paul does not do: he does not assert his own authority, though he certainly has grounds to do so. Instead, he reminds them of the grace and adoption each and everyone of them received in the baptism of Christ. It is Christ alone who brings

salvation. In the midst of strife, we are called to be "united in the same mind and the same purpose" as him whose name we bear. Because we belong to the same Lord and were all redeemed at great price, we ourselves have no authority to remove or ignore someone in our community because they are inconvenient, annoying, or insignificant. Without tolerating injustice, we are invited to always seek reconciliation through mutual repentance and love.

The apostles in today's gospel — Peter, Andrew, James, and John — were not idle when Jesus approached them. They did not have to scramble to appear active. Rather, Jesus appears to them in the midst of their ordinary and salutary labors. They were earning a living, working to feed themselves and their families. Likewise, Jesus invites himself into our daily lives. He does not limit himself to Sunday morning appearances, but accompanies us in our labors at work and in our activities with friends and family. His message to us is as it was then, "repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand." This message of unselfish love and humble service is as foolish today as it was then.

Is a life of humility and love difficult? Indeed. Will we often fail? Most certainly. Do we risk being considered foolish by many? Without doubt. Yet, God's unconditional love for each and every one of us liberates us enough to risk being vulnerable to others. Through Christ, God has opened to us the way of repentance. In repentance, there is no self-deception, but an honest evaluation of our strengths and weaknesses. In the midst of such honesty, there is humility. As a result, where there is repentance, there is open to us the way of reconciliation; the permission and the power to begin again. Therefore, let us be found rejoicing, proclaiming: "We are busy because Jesus has come!"