

The Power of Humility: Sermon for Christmas Day, 2013
Immanuel Lutheran Church
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Last week, before I sat down to begin to work on this sermon, I was reading from my morning devotions. One of the appointed psalms for that day was Psalm 80. Twice in that psalm, near the beginning and at the very end are the following words:

“Restore us O LORD, God of hosts,
Show us the Light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.”

Just consider the faith of the psalmist. He says, “I am saved simply when I see your light O God!” He is saying that salvation comes from God and is a simple thing: God shows us his light and when we truly see it, we are saved.

Show us the Light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

Our gospel reading today is the fulfillment of that request. “The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” (Jn 1:9). Martin Luther says that this is the most important gospel of the church year.¹ Bernard of Clairvaux, “St. Bernard” puts it this way. “Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is born in Bethlehem of Judea.”²

God, the creator of all things:

Of the earth

Of the skies

Of all people

All people: from the first to the last

All people;

God: the Creator of all energy

Of electricity which flows in wires for miles and miles

Of electricity which travels scant millimeters in our brains and

stimulates our nerve cells

God: who created our hearts and has them beat to pump blood through our bodies

God: who has created the very air we breathe

God: who formed the mountains

God: who made the sun which gives our earth heat and light:

¹ Martin Luther, Christmas Sermon, 1521.

² John Leinnen Weber, editor. *Bernard of Clairvaux: Sermons for Advent and the Christmas Season* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Cistercian Publications, 2007), 43 ff.

This God came to earth in the person of Jesus Christ to save his creation: us, from our sins and was born from a virgin in the small town of Bethlehem of Judea.

God, the Creator of all things past, present, and future has revealed himself to us on earth in the form of a child: not just a child, but a new born child.

Our gospel tells us more. This child has extraordinary powers. This child is “the true light that enlightens every man.” (vs. 9) Not all received or accepted him, but for those who did, “who believed in his name”, this new born child “gave power to them to become children of God.” (vs. 13)

There is a dramatic sense of motion going on here. Jesus, the son of the Father, appears among us--- God among us--- Immanuel---as a new born child and those who believe in him are given the power to be children of God. St. Paul described this dramatic motion this way:

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in 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, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he **humbled himself** and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore, God has **highly exalted** him and bestowed upon him the name which is above every name...” (Phil 2: 5-9)

There are three themes in our gospel today which I want to explore: light, humility, and power.

“Show us the light of your countenance that we might be saved” (Ps 80: 3b and 19b) says the psalmist.

“The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world.” (Jn 1:9) says St. John.

This light shows us the way out of the darkness of fear, of worry, of arrogance, of confusion. We are all in this darkness and we see this light and we are drawn to it. The closer we get, the brighter it becomes, and when the darkness is finally overcome, we see more clearly. Imagine you are in the dark, walking along very carefully, step by step. You can see nothing at all. It is scary. You are afraid of falling. You don't even know if you are headed in the right direction. But suddenly, you begin to see a glimmer in the distance. All is still and calm. Something is glowing in the distance. You begin to walk toward it. As you get closer the darkness begins to subside. Soon there is more than a

glow. The walking gets easier. It gets a bit brighter. You see people. You get closer and it becomes clearer. There are people in some sort of a crude structure and you see animals. You notice that the light is coming from something near the ground. You get closer. And what do we see? The new born child: Jesus, the Son of God, born in Bethlehem of Judea.

Jesus: God revealed to us in this vulnerable, humble state. This is what we find when we follow that light in our darkness. This is Jesus who has been born into our world to take hold of all of our sins, take hold of them and bring them to the Cross--to die with them so that we would be saved.

We see Jesus. We see humility. Here, Jesus is humility.

We are promised in this lesson that those who receive him, who believe in him are given power to become children of God. So, we have this amazing gift of power to become children of God—power to be like Jesus. We have been given power to take on the characteristics of Jesus, as St. Peter writes, “to become partakers in the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4). This light in this darkness has revealed divine nature for us: Jesus as a new born child--God among us--Immanuel--humility.

St. Bernard reminds us that God “opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.” (Prov 3:34) Moreover, he writes, “The stable preaches this to you, the manger proclaims it, the infant’s limbs clearly speak it, the tears and crying proclaim the good news.”³

Indeed, there is good news here! Jesus, the Son of God, is born in Bethlehem of Judea!

As believers in this, we are empowered to be children of God. We are given power to be humble.

What is this humility going to look like for us in our everyday lives?

Recently I read something by the great theologian, Karl Barth, which helps me understand humility. He wrote, “Those who handle life as a divine loan will above all treat it with respect...But what does respect for life mean?...What matters is that everyone should treat his existence and that of every other human being with respect. For it belongs to God. It is His loan and blessing.”⁴

Humility is expressed in real thankfulness. Humility is realizing that good health is a blessing, and that taking care of it as well as we can and not abusing it is our thankfulness—our stewardship.

Humility is being thankful for the gifts we have---our mental gifts with which many of us earn our livings---our physical talents such as those of a skilled tradesperson. Our response is stewardship: keeping the skills sharp---- for

³ Ibid. Sermon 3 “On Christ’s Birth and Passion, On Mary’s Virginity and Fruitfulness”, 116.

⁴ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III/4* cited in Stephen Lammers and Allen Vehey, editors, *On Moral Medicine: Theological Perspectives in Medical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988) 154, 156.

me, the gift of music: I still make time to practice so that when my services are called upon I won't let others down.

Humility is being patient---with those who are moving slowly when we are in a hurry---when, if we are driving and the car ahead doesn't respond quickly enough to the green traffic light. Humility---maybe there is a reason---maybe that person sees something which we don't and needs to wait before moving forward.

Humility is realizing that we always can learn something from a situation or from someone else.

Humility is remembering that it is necessary to pray---to give thanks and to ask God for strength --- for us and for everyone.

Humility is forgiving those who have hurt us, and in asking to be forgiven by those we have wronged. This includes, first and foremost, asking forgiveness from God, who promises his forgiveness when we honestly confess, repent, and promise to amend our ways.

Jesus shows us power in humility. At the Last Supper, "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God, rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel. Then he poured water into a basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel with which he was girded." (Jn 13: 3-5) We learn in the Book of Revelation that the final victory over evil is accomplished through humility. "And they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death." (Rev 12:11)

So, in Jesus, who we see by his light, we see the power of humility. But how can we find the power of humility in our lives? Can we do these things? Can we be so humble and yet so strong? The answer is, **Yes, we can!** Through our faith in Jesus, we have Jesus in us. All we have to do is give ourselves over to him in us and he will supply the strength, the courage, and the means. You might say that you don't know how to do this. When Jesus said to Andrew, and to the others, "Follow me" he didn't say "I have a three-year plan and it involvesand ends up in Jerusalem, and...." He said, Follow me." This is **part** of understanding the Word. "In the beginning was the Word." Please, take my suggestion. Just try it. If you doubt yourselves, pray to Jesus for help. He is there, right there in you, just waiting to be asked! I think that you will be surprised at the results.

"But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God; who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."(Jn 1:13)

Martin Luther tells us that Christ is present in the believer---really present. This is a gift. This is the promise of Baptism. Jesus, full of grace and truth, powerfully humble, Jesus abides in you.

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” (Jn1:14). Our gospel tells us that we are empowered in our humility. Let us then give ourselves over to this power: Give ourselves: our minds, our words, our very hands over to Jesus who is in us and allow his power to guide us in every word we speak, and in every action that we take.

This powerful humility---this Immanuel---this Jesus becomes, is, and ever shall be the greatest power: that power which surpasses all understanding. On this Christmas Day, and every day forward, let us all remember this. Let us take the light of Christ’s humility in us and share it with others, and be ever in awe of the powerful humility of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.