

Welcome

Today is officially the last Sunday of 2020. And I know the general vibe is that we're all so glad to be done with 2020 we can hardly stand it. 2021 looks so promising - the COVID vaccine is on the horizon, we're through the election and we're all still basking in the glow of the Christmas season.

So in light of the turn of the new year, I have some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that nothing magical happens on New Year's Day. The difference between 2020 and 2021 is totally arbitrary. The calendar is something we made up. It's an artificial, imperfect invention (remember leap day?).

So I know we're all feeling relief at almost having made it out of 2020, but it doesn't actually mean much.

I know. Major bummer, right? Why did we all tune in today?

But I promised good news! Today is the third day of Christmas! And the 12 Days of Christmas is our feast, our festival celebration that extends well into the new year. Christmas is a celebration of change, a celebration of rescue. A celebration of hope.

In other words, it's a holy festival that celebrates all those things we're feeling about the new year. But rather than being grounded in the arbitrary flip of the calendar page, it's grounded in God's activity in our world.

We don't celebrate because we have to get new calendars. We celebrate because Jesus is with us.

We don't celebrate because we're going to be writing the wrong dates on stuff for the next three weeks. We celebrate because God is at work around us.

So today, we're going to celebrate milestones, marked because God is at work in us. Even in 2020. And definitely in 2021!

Message

Welcome to the Christmas season! Just two days ago, we welcomed Jesus into the world, and into our lives. Before that, we spent the four weeks of Advent preparing for his arrival - both by shopping, wrapping and decorating *and* by preparing our spirits through prayer, scripture and repentance. We called our series this year Christmas at the Crossroads because we're in a time of massive change. 2020 has been marked by the pandemic, which seems closer and closer to an ending. We have a transition in our government coming in a few weeks, which has proven to be more fraught than usual. And that's to say nothing of all the changes - both good and bad - we have experienced and that are ahead of us in this next year.

During Advent, we asked how we could be faithful during this season of change. We saw again and again that we can affirm God is with us, active and present even when we can't discern God's movement. For

the next two weeks of Christmas, we're celebrating God's presence. Remember: we know Jesus will return because of how he arrived the first time: a baby in an ignored corner of the world stage.

What we're celebrating in the Christmas feast is that God did not leave us to carry on business as usual. God disrupted our world - though not in the way anyone expected. God came not tearing open the heavens, but in a baby.

It's a potent reminder that disruptions always carry with them the potential for grace. God does not leave us alone in our discomfort, our disorientation.

And after four weeks of processing disruption, prayer and seeking God, I hope you're as ready as I am to celebrate the good news of Christmas: God with us! As we'll see in our four texts today, this is a time to celebrate God's presence and work.

[Scripture Slide 1] Turn with me to Isaiah 61. This is a poem of hope and restoration. It's set in the wake of the Exile, when God's people have returned to Jerusalem and begun the long process of rebuilding. For God's people, the Exile carried not only the loss of everything they knew or understood, but also a cultural shame. They were the laughing stock of every other nation. They were the people whose God had abandoned them.

In this return, they experienced a new path forward - something so different from the Exile that it felt like a rebirth. They became new people. And you can hear it in the text - they feel like a bride on her wedding day.

A wedding.

Rebirth.

Powerful metaphors for closing an old chapter and beginning a new journey. Let's hear the prophet as he invites God's people to celebrate God's salvation:

I am overwhelmed with joy in the LORD my God! For he has dressed me with the clothing of salvation and draped me in a robe of righteousness.

I am like a bridegroom dressed for his wedding or a bride with her jewels.

The Sovereign LORD will show his justice to the nations of the world. Everyone will praise him!

His righteousness will be like a garden in early spring, with plants springing up everywhere.

Because I love Zion, I will not keep still.

Because my heart yearns for Jerusalem, I cannot remain silent.

I will not stop praying for her until her righteousness shines like the dawn, and her salvation blazes like a burning torch.

The nations will see your righteousness.

World leaders will be blinded by your glory.

And you will be given a new name by the LORD's own mouth.

The LORD will hold you in his hand for all to see— a splendid crown in the hand of God. -- Isaiah 61:10-62:3

God gives God's people a new name. It's rebirth!

The idea of God giving us new names to mark big moments in our spiritual journeys is nothing new. God changed Abram's name to Abraham. Jacob to Israel. And here, the prophet draws on that same renaming tradition, promising that God is not done w/ God's people. Quite the opposite; the past is all prologue to this new thing God is doing.

[Scripture Slide 2] Names are a big deal - anyone who's worried over what to name a kid knows that. Turn with me to Luke 2. This passage actually happens on what we would call the eighth day of Christmas. In Jesus' Jewish tradition, it's the day his parents presented him at the Temple to be dedicated to God, circumcised as a mark of God's covenant and then named.

Of course Mary and Joseph didn't have to decide - we saw last Sunday that, when the angel invited Mary to be the mother of the Messiah, he told her to name him Jesus. We miss this, but "Jesus" is the Greek form of the Hebrew name "Joshua" - as in, the guy who took over for Moses. The Hebrew name means "he saves."

This passage has so much happening in it - I think I've preached out of it the last two or three Christmases. But today, I want simply to observe how central to this moment worship and celebration are.

Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the law of Moses after the birth of a child; so his parents took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, "If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD." So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord—"either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised.

I have seen your salvation, which you have prepared for all people.

He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and he is the glory of your people Israel!" -- Luke 2:22-32

God has become human. The Messiah has been born, and his name is Jesus. Joshua. He saves. How *e/se* should we respond to this new life, these new possibilities?

[Scripture Slide 3] Life with God is like getting married, taking a new name. Life with God is like being reborn. The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, is explaining this to a bunch of non-Jewish Christians. He uses two more metaphors that would have been very near to those Galatian Christians: slavery and adoption.

Slavery was a common practice in the world of the New Testament. It wasn't grounded in racism like American slavery. Instead, people often sold themselves into slavery, and could buy themselves out. And adoption was a common practice, especially among nobility. Maybe the most famous adoption was Caesar Augustus - the Roman Emperor when Jesus was born. He was Julius Caesar's nephew, but Caesar adopted him, thus making him Caesar's rightful heir. Claudius, the emperor when Paul wrote Galatians, adopted his nephew Nero, who would take over for Claudius (and who would prove to be the worst).

When the right time came, God sent his Son, born of a woman, subject to the law. God sent him to buy freedom for us who were slaves to the law, so that he could adopt us as his very own children. And because we are his children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, prompting us to call out, "Abba, Father." Now you are no longer a slave but God's own child. And since you are his child, God has made you his heir. -- Galatians 4:4-7

Paul asks the Galatians to imagine that God has purchased us out of slavery and given us freedom. But not just freedom. We have been adopted by the one, true Caesar and Lord of all creation. We are now heirs of God's kingdom.

Over and over, as the first Christians tried to grapple with what had happened when Jesus arrived on Earth, they came back to these powerful, disruptive metaphors. They wanted to signal, as loudly as possible, that the old was gone and the new was coming.

Jesus' arrival in our lives is like being set free.

Jesus' arrival in our lives is like being adopted into a royal family.

Jesus' arrival in our lives is like our wedding day.

Jesus' arrival in our lives is like being born all over again.

I want you to think about the last year. Is there a word, a label, a name that would characterize this last year? Something you want to leave behind?

Maybe stressed, anxious, sick. Alone. Angry. Afraid.

Christmas is the celebration that God is with us. God has come among us to heal us, save us. And so we can receive from God the new names God has given us, names that mark us as God's own beloved children.

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] We share in God's table, as God's children together!

1. What is the name I want to leave behind me in this new year?
2. What is the name God is giving me for this new year?

Is there a fun way to read Psalm 148 before the final song(s)?

Assignment + Blessing

Friends, as we move into 2021, I would love to be able to tell you that flipping a calendar page magically makes our world a better, more just place. But we all know it doesn't.

But what I can affirm, and what we can celebrate, is that God is still present with us. God has been working among us and within us throughout the pandemic. Whatever 2021 holds for us all, God is continuing to do the hard work of justice, and inviting us all to join in.