

November 22, 2009

The National Presbyterian Church

A City Prepared for a King

Galatians 4:4-7; Psalm 24:7-10

Rev. Earl F. Palmer

On this Christ the King Sunday, we have a great text from St. Paul's letter to the Galatians. This is what he says:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying "Abba, [in Hebrew, "Abba" is the affectionate word for "father"], Abba father," so you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child, then also an heir through God.
(Galatians 4:4-7)

During these last weeks we have taken a journey with a people, Abraham's people. We started with the father Abraham. We looked at Moses, David the King, Solomon, Jeremiah the prophet during the hard times, in 586 years before Christ when the city of Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians and Solomon's temple leveled. And then we saw the people during their 70 years of captivity in Babylon. We read about Daniel and three heroes Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego in that period. And then the people are brought back to their own prior land by Cyrus the Great as the new Persian Empire emerges in the north, destroys the ancient Babylonians, so that the people of Israel are restored to their land and then they rebuild their temple on a more modest scale. They rebuild their city.

But we call that period after the return the "period of wars and rumors of wars," as one great power after another moves through the Middle East.

We believe that the sun is in the sky at midday in summer not because we can clearly see the sun. In fact, we cannot. [You know, you cannot look at the sun. Isn't that ironic? You'd go blind if you did.] We believe the sun is in the sky at midday in summer, not because we can clearly see the sun; in fact, we cannot, but because we can see everything else.¹

Jesus Christ makes sense of everything else. He pulls all the pieces together. Our yearning for a father like Abraham, our identity (notice Paul brings that up), a yearning for a king like David, he is the King who makes sense of everything and is the one who brings happiness and fulfillment. He uses the word "fulfillment" in his text, and Jesus is the deliverer like Moses. He is the one who redeems. Jesus Christ does this. That's what we celebrate at Advent.

Let me ask you a question. What are you looking for, and is the time right? Is this the right time to find what you're looking for to find the answers to the deepest questions? Is this the right time to believe, to give thanks, to share love? Is it right now? Have we held off deciding to do and believe because we are waiting for some perfect future time? If we take a step back, then may we now step forward to trust this Lord of our right time, right now.

Heavenly Father, thank you that right now is the right time. It's the right time for Thanksgiving, it's the right time to share, it's the right time to trust in your faithfulness, it's the right time to discover who we are, it's the right time to discover your grace and your faithfulness. May each of us discover your grace during this wonderful time, the time of Christ the King, the time of Advent, the time of American Thanksgiving too. We ask it all in Jesus' name, Amen.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *Miracles: A Preliminary Study*. Touchstone Books, 1946.

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Sunday Worship at 8, 9:15 & 11 a.m.

Classes for Adults, Youth, and Children at 9:15 a.m.

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Of course the one that was the most important was Alexander the Great in 336 B.C., who brought with him the Greek language. It became the *lingua franca* of the whole Mediterranean world. Then followed a power that was so important for the people of the Holy Land, the Seleucid empire, which lasted almost 200 years. And during that time a Jewish revolt occurred; Judas Maccabees led a revolt against the Seleucids. It was successful probably because the Seleucids were preoccupied. They were preoccupied on the north with the new resurgence of the old Persian empire they called the Parthians, and on the south with Egypt rising up again, and on the west a new empire called the Romans. They're going to establish an empire throughout the whole the Mediterranean world that will last for 450 years unchallenged. Well, the Seleucids therefore were preoccupied and that enabled Judas Maccabees to succeed in a Jewish revolt 150 years before Christ; then for about 70 or 80 years there is a short period when the Jews have their own king, the Judas Maccabees house. And they ruled more or less for about 70 years.

But toward the end of that period they had become so weakened by internal corruption, that they hired actually a foreigner to be prime minister for the last years of the Maccabean house, and that was a non-Jew named Antipater. He was probably from Petra. He was a Nabatean, and he became the prime minister. In 60 B.C. when the Romans are sweeping south, two young Roman generals are leading that sweep, a man named Marc Anthony and another man named Octavian, when they came through, this man Antipater realized that the future rested with the Romans and not with the Parthians and obviously not with the Seleucids, they're gone, and not the Egyptians. It's going to be this new empire, the Romans.

And so Antipater sided with them and became an ally with them and he was richly rewarded for it. When Marc Anthony and Octavian went back to Rome and reported to Julius Caesar, they said this man was very helpful to us. So Julius Caesar honored him and gave him permanent Roman citizenship and gave him great wealth. He was given lands in Cyprus. He was given lands throughout the Holy Land, by the Romans, who now control everything. Now the Romans decided to follow the same policy that the Persians had followed and that is to reestablish all the local nations where they had now taken control and allow them to have their own kings and allow them to have their own religion, their own religious courts, but all under Roman power.

And so they decided the Jews needed a king, but who should be the king of the Jews? They thought, well, Antipater has been our great friend, so they're

yesterday, today and forever is really new. Aim therefore always at that which is at once eternal, universal, personal, concrete.

That's Jesus Christ. Christ the King. That's what we celebrate in Advent. We've decided to title this whole series for Advent "The Only New Thing," from Charles Malik's great speech. St. Paul said it first, "When the time was just right, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law." And why do we know the time is right, because it's really an awkward time right now. Jerusalem is in a tough spot right now, but Christ is coming to redeem. He's coming to make sense out of everything.

In 1944, C.S. Lewis wrote a book called *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* and he creates an amazing analogy that helps me understand this as well as anything I've ever read. He says this in his chapter, "The Grand Miracle," the chapter about the coming of Jesus Christ. He says,

Let us suppose we possess parts of a novel or a symphony. Someone now brings us a newly discovered piece of manuscript and says this is the missing part of the work; this is the chapter in which the whole plot of the novel really turns. This is the main theme of the symphony. Now our business would be to see whether this new passage if admitted to the central place which the discoverer claimed for it did actually illuminate all the parts that we have already seen and pull them together. [I love that line from C.S. Lewis, to pull everything together, to make sense of everything]. *Now, we should not go far wrong if the new passage is spurious, however attractive it looks at first glance, it will become harder and harder to reconcile with the rest of the work. But if it were genuine, then at every fresh hearing of the music and every fresh reading of the book we should find it settling down, making itself more at home and eliciting significance from all sorts of details in the whole work which we had hitherto neglected. Even though the new central chapter or main theme contain great difficulties in itself, we should still think it genuine provided it continually removed difficulties elsewhere. Something like this we must do with the doctrine of the coming of Jesus Christ. Here instead of a symphony or a novel, we have the whole mass of our knowledge. The credibility will depend on the extent to which the doctrine if accepted can illuminate and integrate the whole mass. It is much less important that the doctrine should be fully comprehensible.* [Notice how Paul says this is grace beyond our understanding. John's Gospel begins that way too, the world has not comprehended it when the Word became flesh. We haven't comprehended it. We can't fully understand all of the mystery. What a mystery it is, God coming to us. So he said it is less important that the doctrine should be fully comprehensible, and then he ends with a quote from G.K. Chesterton.]

you know. Wouldn't it be more logical to do it in the spring after we know we made it through another winter? And I can imagine that if they were having a moment of governance decision-making that someone could argue, "Maybe, you know, this is not a good time; we should wait and be more prudent. We've got the money, we've got some harvest now, but you know, we need to go through the winter and we know that last winter was pretty bad. In spring we'll do it. The sun will be out, the flowers will be blooming."

But then, you know, maybe that isn't the right time either, because we've got all the grain, yes, we've got to plant and we've got to make sure we have more crops. So let's wait until summer. In summer it will be sunny and everybody will be happy but in the summer you know, there are droughts. And a drought could come and destroy the entire crop that we think is doing alright right now. So let's wait until fall when we know the crops are in. And then we're right back full circle again. We've got our crops in but we've got winter ahead of us.

Folks, you tell me when is the right time to share? When is the right time to have pledge Sunday in a church? Today is pledge Sunday. Many of you including myself made pledges. I'm excited about that. Today is the day that we thank God and we make sure that this ministry is going to continue, that the ministry to children, families and youth is going to continue. Now is just the right time to invest in the future. Well, when is the right time to share? Is there any right time? Paul says the right time is when we need it most. The right time is when things are in stress. This is the right time.

In 1955, I had a great experience as a student at Princeton Seminary. We had a famous visitor come to Princeton Seminary who gave a speech and I'll never forget it. It was a speech by ambassador Charles Habib Malik who was the ambassador of Lebanon to the United Nations. He was a Maronite Catholic and a very great philosopher. This is the last line of his great speech. He said,

Never be ashamed of Jesus Christ or of His Gospel. It is the only new thing in the world. Everything else is as old as the hills, even the latest vaccine [and you know the vaccine for polio had just been invented], or the latest bomb. [Something good and something terrifying that we were worried about at that time, 1955. It's interesting, isn't it, how contemporary that is now. We're now worried about the possibility of an Iranian bomb. But what is the only new thing?] All else is as old as the hills, even the latest vaccine or the latest bomb. Only the eternal, only that which is the same

about to make Antipater the king to reward him and he's assassinated, and also his oldest son is assassinated. So they take his other son and Julius Caesar by decree makes that other son the king of the Jews, and that man is Herod the Great. Thirty-seven years he reigned from 38 B.C. up until about 6 A.D. He was a very evil man. He decided he wanted to ingratiate himself with the Jews, so he married the last remaining woman in the house of the Maccabean family. Her name was Miriam. She had by him two sons. He was so paranoid that he was afraid those sons might be making a claim upon his kingship when they were just little boys, and so he arranged for the murder of his two sons and his wife.

This helps you understand why the massacre of the innocents could occur after the birth of Christ. Herod had already murdered his own sons. He was a very cruel and suspicious man, yet he had power and immense wealth. From his wealth he built a palace on the Mediterranean Sea called Caesarea. He named it in honor of Caesar obviously. Caesar was his friend. He built a palace in Jerusalem itself and called it the Antonius Fortress. That's the palace that the Romans rented from him and that's where Pontius Pilate held the trial of Jesus, the Antonius Fortress. It was named after Marc Anthony. He had a huge palace near the Dead Sea called Masada, and some of you may have traveled to the Dead Sea and seen that palace, what was left of that palace. He also had a palace near Jericho.

He built an aqueduct to the city of Jerusalem to try to win favor with the people. He built a huge arena for horses and for great games and for his grandest project he rebuilt the temple. His building of the temple was his main ploy to win Jewish support - it took 37 years to build it and the lower stones of that temple on Mount Zion are what is now called the Western Wall, the "wailing wall" for modern Judaism, the most sacred site. But it's not the temple of Solomon. It was the temple Herod built. Herod the Great is not even Jewish, yet he is King of the Jews. The people are very unfavorable toward him so he has no popularity with the people, and yet, St. Paul will say of this very awkward time, "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law." The time was just right. In other words, Paul says, when the time was right, at just the right moment - that's what that means - God sent forth his Son.

Does this seem the right moment to us? Herod is the king of the Jews, totally corrupt, totally cruel. The Romans have complete control over the

whole of the Mediterranean world, their rule is strict and severe. It's so severe that in 70 A.D. because of uprisings that occur among the Jews who are restless because of Herod and because of the Romans, that Roman soldiers will actually destroy the city of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. That's how powerful the Romans are.

When our Lord was born, a new Caesar reigns in the Roman Empire and that new Caesar is Caesar Augustus. You know who Caesar Augustus is? That young general, Octavian, the general who had been there as a young warrior has now become Caesar Augustus. Luke will begin his Gospel, "In those days the decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed" (Luke 2:1). So that's the right time? Is it the right time with Roman oppression? Shouldn't everything wait a little while until maybe some other power will come forward that will be more favorable? Shouldn't we wait until another king comes in instead of Herod? But then we will wait a long time. The House of Herod stays in place all the way until 90 A.D. even after the fall of Jerusalem, because of their favorable relationship with the Caesars. What about the spiritual life of the people? Are they ready?

Their religious life is totally conflicted by the time of the first century. The Sadducee group controls the high priesthood, but they've so compromised with Herod and with everybody else that the worship in the temple is seen as corrupted. In fact, they've imported into the temple moneychangers from whom they receive commissions so that when our Lord made his first trip to Jerusalem he chased the moneychangers out of the temple (John 2). And it's interesting, the group of laymen called the Pharisee movement who do not like the Sadducees, they don't come up to Jesus and tell him to stop doing that. No, instead they say, "Give us a sign for doing it" (John 2:19). They were happy that he chased the moneychangers out.

So the Pharisee movement opposes the Sadducees. The Essenes were a separatist group that lived down by the Dead Sea. They were a little bit weird to be sure; they didn't bathe, but they were good librarians. They saved all their books in jars in the caves outside of Qumran, which were found in 1946, and we're grateful for that. That's the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Essenes are so outraged by what's going on religiously that they won't even go to Jerusalem and will not enter the temple. They will not put one foot in the temple because they feel the temple has been corrupted. The fact that it was built by Herod doesn't help, and also they felt it was not faithful to the Law. And yet, Paul says our Lord came at just the right time.

Does that sound like a perfect time to you? Does it sound like a right time?

Paul tells us that Jesus Christ was born at the right time. Well, I agree with Paul. This confusing time is just the right time. It's just the right time because Jesus Christ is born to redeem, to set us free and to ensure who we are so that we'll know that we're children and heirs. So it's because of what Jesus Christ comes to do that makes the time right. If there was ever time that the people needed a redeemer, it's now, and that's when Christ came. He came at just the time when everything looked really gloomy, when everything is in distress; that was the right time according to St. Paul, not when everything is ready and perfectly organized and eager for the King, but ready to be healed and made safe from the toxic atmosphere of their time.

The Jews have a great set of yearnings. We looked at these during the last weeks. They had a yearning for a father like Abraham. That's a great identity yearning of the Jews. They had a yearning for a king like David. And by the way, today is Christ the King Sunday in the Christian year. Today is the last day of the Christian year. Next Sunday is Advent, the beginning as we look forward to the birth of Christ. Today the color is white. This is the white color of Christ the Lord. And this is the right day. Paul says when the time was just right, Christ was born, because Christ who is born is the Redeemer.

You know, this is also a national holiday week for us. In fact, America's favorite national holiday is this week, Thanksgiving Day. It's a favorite day for Americans. When we think of all the American national holidays, this is our best. It's better than the Fourth of July. It's Thanksgiving Day. It's interesting, isn't it, that we know the Pilgrims had a Thanksgiving time after their first hard winter in which they shared from their first harvest with Indians who had befriended them. But the first official Thanksgiving Day in America was by presidential proclamation in 1863, by the proclamation of Abraham Lincoln that this fourth Thursday in the month of November would be a Thanksgiving Day. Now folks, does that seem like a logical time, 1863? America is totally broken with two more years ahead in the War Between the States; America is profoundly wounded and upset between North and South, and anger is on all sides. Is that the right time to have Thanksgiving Day? Well, Abraham Lincoln thought so. He chose this awkward time and said it's just the right time for us to thank God for his providence. It's a time for us to thank God and to be sharing what we have with others, because that's what Thanksgiving is all about. It's a time to give thanks and to share out of the bounty of God's grace with others.

But it seems an odd time. I think of the Pilgrims after that hard winter in the fall, they have a harvest. It doesn't seem to make sense to share their turkeys and to share their grain with everybody around them. Winter's coming,