

12-24 SermonB18Advent4

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16

Luke 1:26-38

My daughter, Emily, often finds herself struggling this time of year. As fall turns to winter in the Minneapolis/St. Paul metropolitan area she finds herself going to work in the dark and coming home from work in the dark. The lengthening darkness at the 45th parallel brings on bouts of Seasonal Affective Disorder. Coming home to an apartment where the only other tenant is crabby 13 year old cat named Hector doesn't help much either. Weekends can be particularly difficult because many of her friends have young children and it's their "family time." A few weeks ago she was having a particularly bad time of it. She called me on Friday night, but what can you do when you are thousands of miles away? My heart ached for her when I went to sleep that night and it was still aching when I woke up that Saturday morning.

Then, around 11 AM Pacific Time that same morning the phone rang and I could have sworn that I was talking to an entirely different person. It wasn't. It was Emily and she was with a friend who had called her at 8:45 AM Central Time "invited" her "on an 'emergency run' to Target. They planned to make a gingerbread house and were going to Target to get everything they possibly needed. The picture on her Facebook page showed a sugar loaded assortment of Nerds, Dots, Cinnamon Imperials, Mini-Marshmallows, Frosted Mini-Wheats, Red Vine licorice, Wilton brand decorating icing in a wide variety of colors, and a whole lot more ... including an undecorated gingerbread house that you can apparently buy ready-made now.

Now, some of us might not consider a run to Target for those things a *real emergency*, but it was for the two of them on that particular morning. You see, Melissa K finds this time of year difficult too. She didn't have the best childhood and like others growing up in similar circumstances she has to work hard at managing the aftermath of that ... symptomatic behaviors and thoughts that make responsible "adulting" difficult on most days and impossible

on others. That morning the decision to indulge in some child-like creativity was actually a really good adult decision.


Back on my end of the story I found myself checking Emily's Facebook page for the result of their efforts. Since both of them are creative and artistic I fully expected to find a gingerbread house so yummy looking that it could have won a ribbon at any one of the many competitions this time of year. I checked in and out for several days ... nothing ... not a Hershey Bar door or a Necco Wafer shingle to be found. Did they eat it all before taking a picture? Did they fail to meet some high artistic standard they set? It puzzled me.

Finally and all at once, a thought that should have been obvious to me from the start entered my mind. It wasn't about building the *gingerbread house* at all! It was about them. It was about how they made-love-real by showing up for one another without judgement in an anxious time of need. It was about extending as much compassion and care to someone outside our blood family circle as we do to people on the inside of that circle.

In our first lesson for today we meet up with King David after he has been anointed king of all Israel and made his capital city Jerusalem. He's danced before the Ark of the Covenant, as his soldiers brought it into the city. And now, finally, the king and his troops are no longer on the run or in battle first here and then there. Their camping days are over and they settle into permanent housing. David's house is, apparently, constructed of wood ... cedar to be specific. Just as he's settling into his new digs, an unsettling thought occurs to him. He had a proper home, but the Ark of the Covenant, which was the symbolic presence and power of God on Earth, still lived in a tent. He took it upon himself to remedy that situation by building a house for God. Probably to David's surprise, God didn't actually want to promote the idea of being pinned down in one place among one people. God had a plan for a different sort of dwelling place in mind ... a place of substance and spirit ... the heart, mind, body and spirit of all humanity.

Some one thousand years later God begins to work the plan by sending an angel to a very young woman named Mary. There is endless speculation about why God chose Mary. The speculation has resulted in all sorts of doctrines that people continue to argue about today. Was Mary a virgin? Was Mary herself born without the stain of original sin? Some people think that answers to questions like these are not just interesting but also important. I'm not one of them. What I do find interesting and enlightening is the greeting the angel bestows on Mary: **χαίρε κεχαριτωμενη** (chaíre - kechai'rae to me nay).

The two words **χαίρε** (chaíre) and **κεχαριτωμενη** (ke chai'rehto' meh nay) share a single root: **χαίρω** (chaírō). In Greek it means to be full of cheer, calmly happy, well off, or exceedingly joyful. There are six equivalent Hebrew words. Four of them mean about the same as the Greek word. Two, though ... two are very different. The first is **אהב** (aw – hav') and it means: to love. The second is **שלום** (shâlôm) it means wholeness, tranquility and peace. In effect the angel says to Mary, "Loving Lover, Wholly Whole, Tranquilly Tranquil, and Peacefully Peaceful young lady - God will dwell not in a tent, or a temple, or a synagogue a mosque or a church. God will dwell in the flesh within you.

A little over thirty years later, Jesus Christ, the child born to Mary, promises humankind that God's wholly healing, wholly peaceful, wholly tranquil, wholly loving presence will dwell in human hearts ... dwell in our hearts ... until the end of time. "Remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Matthew 28:20) Jesus says. He also commands us to make God's ever present love with a capital "L" real and active in the world. (John 13:34) The wonderful thing about it is that whenever we do that, whenever we love one another as brother and sister, we find that we are a little more hopeful, a little more peaceful, a little more joyful, and a little more sure that we are fully loveable and fully loved by God too. Whenever we act out the love of God that dwells within us, we become the very light in the darkness that we need ourselves. 

We are now on the other side of the Winter Solstice. The darkest day of the calendar has passed. The darkness in the political, economic, and social world around us seems more persistent and pervasive. **The Good News today is that each and every one of us is empowered by the indwelling Christ within us to have a part in overcoming that darkness.**

This past Thursday, the day of the Winter Solstice, my daughter posted these words:

Heyo! How about a buddy check? A lot of us struggle this time of year for all sorts of reasons. I've heard from several of you that it's been especially tough this year. Today's the darkest day of the year and it's always darkest before the dawn. We can do hard things, but sometimes it gets harder than do-able. Please know that there are helpers out there if you need them.

And if you have no idea where to start, reach out. I know what it's like to try finding the right number to call when you have absolutely no idea what the next step needs to be.

It didn't take much time. She didn't get a gingerbread house out of the effort. But, she did discover anew God's love for her by sharing it with others. I pray that in the business and anxiousness of the coming days and months ahead we'll all find ways to do the same. AMEN