

Unto Us a Child is Born.

Last Sunday the Adult Education Class studied today's texts and helped plan part of the worship service. You have them to thank for the hymns we're singing and some of the prayers. As we looked at the text together, we listed some of the important words, and after we were done I was struck by the contrast between some of the words. you might even say they create a paradox. Look at them for yourself on this white board and see what you think:

Do you see what I mean? Look at all these words--they're powerful, majestic, even awe inspiring. (Lord, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, justice, equity, Government, Savior) And look at this, shorter list. (Child, born).

What's going on here? Can the Good tidings of great joy really be that great? Can we really expect this tiny baby to carry the government upon his shoulder?

The answer to those questions takes us to the heart of the gospel. This morning I want to try to answer them by turning to the movie so many people have waited for so long, a movie that some of you may have seen or may see soon: The Lord of the Rings. Now Tolkien was a very devout Christian. He intertwined Christian themes throughout the book (someone dies for his friends, someone else is the unrecognized true king who is restored to this throne.) But the central point of the book is what I want to focus on this morning, because that is where we find the parallel to the Christmas story.

If you've seen the first two movies you already know that there is this ring--a ring of great power. It can intensify and strengthen any powers one has, but it can also corrupt. The forces of evil want it desperately--if they can possess it they can conquer the world. Those who are fighting against the evil ones have the ring, and they know that they can't win by using it--if they try that the one who uses it will himself become evil. What to do? They have a council to discuss the problem and conclude that the only answer is to destroy it. Now the only way to destroy it is to throw it into the molten fires of Mount Doom, which is right in the center of the enemy's territory. But who can do this? Should it be Gandolf the mighty wizard? He refuses. He knows the temptation to use the ring would be too great. Should it be the mighty warrior Aragon? He, too, is too wise to attempt the task. Then the elf Legolas? He has magical powers. But for that very reason. Legolas says no. Then Frodo, the little hobbit--half the size of a man, weak, timid, known more for his love of eating and fun than for his wisdom or might, Frodo says he will take the ring. He will go. The others are stunned.

Then Gandolf says, it might work. The evil ones would never imagine that we wouldn't use the ring and its power. It would never occur to them that we would try to destroy the ring. And it would be inconceivable to them that we would give the ring to the weakest one of us. And so Frodo sets off with his friends on his perilous journey. If you haven't seen the movie, I won't spoil the ending by telling you what happens then.

But do you see what Tolkein is saying? Of course this isn't a perfect illustration. Frodo is fallible. Frodo does things wrong, but still we get the point. It isn't the power of might, of domination that can save the world, it is the power of love, of loyalty, of service, and as Frodo shows later, compassion that saves the day, that saves the world.

Let's travel now from Middle Earth to Judea, and ask the question, Who can save the world. Is it Caesar Augustus? No, not him. He and the Romans already tried, by their might, by their domination, but it didn't work. It just made their subjects resentful and rebellious. Well, then maybe we should look closer to home--to Herod, the Jewish king. No, not Herod. He is a wicked tyrant, concerned only for his own power. Well, what about one of the priests. Not them either; they're focused on the temple and the law. Zacariah is the best of them and even when he met an angel he couldn't muster the faith to believe what he heard. Well, I hear that Zacariah's son is going to be a prophet. Maybe he's the one. No, no he's going to be great, but he won't be able to hold a candle to this little one, this little baby, born in a barn with a feeding trough for a cradle. This little one, this weak, helpless little baby will be the savior of the world.

Do we get it? Do we after 2000 years, understand, really understand what God is doing, what God is saying. The story of Christmas shows us that the power of might, of domination will not, cannot save the world. it is the power of love, of loyalty, of service, of compassion that saves the world. Someone once said, Once God became a baby, nothing little can ever be insignificant again. So you see the point of Christmas is that strange as it seems, the only one, the only one who can be Lord, Savior...is the tiny child born to us--baby Jesus. What if the story of Christmas also means that God continues to act in the world this way, through love and persuasion, rather than force.

What would this mean for us? What difference would it make in how we live our lives?

First it would mean that we trust in the love of God, rather than the power of the world, or our own power. Second it would mean that we would act differently--we would serve and forgive, rather than worrying about getting ahead and getting

our own way. Third it would mean that our attitudes and values are different. Someone has said. "Since God became a little baby, nothing little can be insignificant. We will see things other people and ourselves differently. Actually the baby grew up and showed us all this. An old song from the 60's said it well. "He was a flop at thirty-three. He would ignore the cocktail hour and contemplate a flower." Of course the world didn't understand him, nor will it understand us if we follow him.

Perhaps we come closest to believing this when we kneel with the shepherds before the manger and worship the hope of the world. We may even leave like them, praising God. But do we remember in the days and the weeks to come? It means changing the way we view ourselves and each other and our world. And we may forget and have to try again, day after day. But God doesn't mind. God will forgive us and help us try again. God is very patient.

Connie and Aaron, you are choosing today to join us as we kneel at the manger. to join us as we live our lives of faith , to join us as we follow one who triumphs by love rather than might. We promise to pray for you and support you in this adventure and we ask that you do the same for us.