

ADVENT 1

November 29, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Jeremiah 33:14-16 – Psalm 25:1-10 – I Thessalonians 3:9-13 – ***Luke 21:25-36***

Someone once said that all of life is the search for normalcy. This is the human condition. When tragedy strikes, what do we do? We seek to return to the routine – the normal – as quickly as possible. We seek balance. We seek the illusion that the world is under our control.

Today's reading from Luke is anything but normal. We're told that in the future the world is in turmoil. There will be disasters and confusion. And the Son of Man will break in, in the midst of all this confusion. These are not signs of some terrible calamity; they are signs of redemption.

+ + +

One of my favorite movies was on yesterday. I think you all know by now how much I like movies. And there are some I will watch over and over again. This one is called “50 First Dates.” It's the story of Lucy and Henry. Lucy is a young woman who was in a horrible car accident on her father, Marlin's, birthday. As a result of that accident she is no longer able to store new long-term memories. Lucy has no memory of the accident, or of spending three months in the hospital after the accident. Every day she wakes up, it's Sunday and once again, Marlin's birthday.

Lucy's father and brother, along with a few friends, take great pains to make sure that Lucy never finds out what happened. They seek to make Lucy's life as normal and routine as possible. Every day she has breakfast at her friends' diner, where she breakfasted every Sunday before the accident. And every day, she and her father go to pick a pineapple, their birthday ritual. Every day Marlin suggests that Lucy, previously an art teacher, paint his workshop. And while she paints, Lucy's father and brother watch a tape of the Vikings game, the game that they'd recorded on that fateful day. After dinner, Lucy suggests they watch the birthday DVD she gave her father. Every evening, they watch "The Sixth Sense." And every day, it's completely new to Lucy.

Every night, after Lucy has gone to bed, Lucy's father and brother scurry about the house resetting things for the following day, when it will be a completely new day to Lucy. Marlin takes a picture of Lucy's latest artwork in his workshop, then repaints his workshop white in preparation for the art Lucy will create the next day. He gets a fresh newspaper out of storage, where he has stored hundreds of copies of the newspaper from the day of Lucy's accident, and lovingly places it at the front door. This routine goes on for many months. All this so that Lucy can have a "normal" life, completely unaware of the horrible accident that has robbed her of living a full life.

Then, one day, Henry walks in to the diner. He's immediately taken with Lucy. Henry manages to come up with a winning opening line, and he and Lucy share an enjoyable breakfast together. As they leave the diner, they agree to meet for breakfast the next morning.

Of course, the next morning when Henry arrives at the diner, Lucy has no idea who Henry is. Henry is understandably confused. Lucy's friend Sue hustles Henry out of the diner and quickly explains Lucy's "condition" to Henry. She firmly urges Henry to "get lost!"

Obviously, this is not where the story ends. Henry persists. And in the end, love conquers all.

+ + +

So once again I've probably left you wondering, Why is she telling us this? What does this have to do with today's Gospel reading?

First of all, I think this is a good analogy for our lives and today's lesson. Here we are, doing our best to live lives of routine and normalcy – whatever that is. We're Marlin, Lucy's father. We're doing our best to exercise that illusion of control. Despite the best of Marlin's attempts, though, Lucy's routine life gets interrupted.

And just like in this story, God finds unexpected and surprising ways to break into our lives. God is the Henry in our lives. God finds ways to interrupt our routine. Like our lesson from today, these interruptions often create turmoil. But as today's lesson assures us, when God breaks into our lives, we can rest assured that our redemption is near. God's interruptions come with love: manifest, abundant, redeeming love.

I can attest to that from first-hand knowledge. Prior to my fateful day in 1992, believe me, the thought of being a pastor had never entered my mind. But God broke into my routine life in a most surprising way, completely disrupting my illusion of control. And with that in-breaking, God brought with him my redemption.

God's call to the ordained ministry gave my life purpose that had never before existed. Even members of my family said that they never really thought that I would or could persist for 16 years to become a pastor. Quite frankly, I didn't think I could, either. Of my own will, I probably could not have; but with God, all things are, indeed, possible.

Second, despite the fact that I've seen "50 First Dates" countless times, watching it yesterday touched me in new ways. I was reminded of a basic tenet of Lutheranism, but one you probably haven't heard of. In academic vernacular Luther said *finitum capax infiniti* – that's Latin for "the finite is capable of bearing the infinite." So, as Luther would have said: What does this mean?

The full flower of this bit of theology came when Luther debated Huldreich Zwingli, the leader of the Swiss reformation, at the German city of Marburg in 1529. Luther's and Zwingli's major point of disagreement was on the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Luther's doctrine of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine of the Eucharist is based in his – and our – understanding of the Trinity. Because God is capable of being in all places at all times, then Christ is capable of being in all places at all times. Just because Jesus became human does not limit him in the human sense; he still retains God's ability to be in all places at all times. Space and time are not restrictive for God.

And for Luther, this ubiquity of God – the ability to be in all places at all times – is not limited solely to the bread and wine of the Eucharist. Indeed, “all of creation can serve the creator. This is the theological foundation for Luther’s profound appreciation of nature and art as vehicles for communicating the gospel.”¹ And God’s use of all creation to communicate the Gospel can even include movies.

+ + +

So what bit of Gospel did I get out of watching “50 First Dates” yesterday afternoon? I saw a group of people who so profoundly love Lucy that they would go to great pains and significantly disrupt their own lives for her sake. This is self-sacrificial love. It’s Christ-like love.

I’m also reminded that, as we await the advent of our Christ – that great cosmic interruption that turns all that we thought we knew about life inside-out and upside-down – that the finite is still capable of bearing the infinite. God is still able to break into His creation whenever and where ever he chooses. God may just choose to break into our lives through the finite this Advent season.

What would happen if, every time you saw candles or Christmas lights, you let them remind you of the One who has come into this world as the Light of the World? That might lead us to seek to be a light to others.

What would happen if, every time you were tempted to eat yet another Christmas cookie, you let it remind you that you have already been fed by the Bread of Life? That might cause you to pause and ponder God's abundant goodness.

What would happen if, every time you heard a Christmas song, it reminded you of the very first Christmas carol: the angelic announcement that God had come to earth in the Christ child? That might lead you to think of ways to be Jesus' hands and feet in someone's life.

Yes, God interrupts our lives in surprising ways. The finite things of Christmas lights, cookies and songs can, indeed, be bearers of the infinite God to us, reminders of the ways God has already broken into our lives, and reminders to be Christ-bearers to others.

Amen.

<1,485 words>

¹ Carter Lindberg, *The European Reformations* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1996), 194.