

Our Old Testament Scripture reading comes from the book of Exodus, Chapter 33, beginning at verse 12. Moses and the people are on their way to the land God has promised them. In the course of the journey, Moses regularly went to the tent of meeting to talk with God. Earlier in this chapter we are told that the Lord spoke to Moses “as one speaks to a friend.” Our text today is an account of one of these conversations, in which Moses makes an appeal to God to reveal Himself and His intentions. Listen for God’s Word.

Read Exodus 33:12-23

In our New Testament text, we turn again this week to the Gospel of Luke, Chapter 2, in which we are told about the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, a scene in which God’s glory is shown in ordinary and extraordinary ways. Listen again for God’s word.

Read Luke 2:1-20

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

‘Twas the night before Christmas, and I was fourteen years old. My parents had finalized their divorce earlier that summer. So it was sort of a different Christmas for my family. My grandparents came to visit us for Christmas that year. So on Christmas Eve my mother, my grandmother, my grandfather, and I had a quiet dinner together, went to worship, and then we all went to sleep. About 5:00 in the morning, I felt someone nudging my shoulder. It was my grandfather. Now I’ve never met anyone who anticipated Christmas more than my grandfather. My guess is he had been lying awake all night, waiting for Christmas morning, eager to wake us up. I was the lucky first victim. “Time to get up,” he said, “it’s Christmas morning! Hurry! You don’t want to miss it!”

I mentioned I was fourteen, right? If you are a teenager or if you’ve ever had a teenager in your home, you know that, given a chance to sleep in, a teenager won’t see morning. So I

pulled my blanket over my head and mumbled, “OK, Papa, I’ll get up, just give me about six more hours.” Well, not only is my grandfather enthusiastic, he is also persistent. “Go wake your mother,” he said. So I trudged down the hall and called into my mother’s room, “Mom, Papa says it’s time to get up.” She said, “It’s 5am. Go back to bed.” As a teenager, I’ve never been so eager to obey my mom. So I walked back down the hall, passed my grandfather on the way, and said, “Mom said go back to bed, and I’m supposed to do what mom says, right?” Not to be defeated, my grandfather said, “Fine, I’ll go make breakfast.”

Now I don’t do a lot of cooking when it comes to breakfast. Usually pouring milk on cereal is about the extent of my cooking in the morning. So I don’t claim to be an expert in what all cooking breakfast entails. But I do know this: I don’t think making breakfast requires pulling every pot and pan out of the cupboard and dropping them on the floor. After about ten minutes of listening to metal clanging on the floor, my grandmother, my mom, and I gave in and reluctantly walked down the stairs. There on the table were hot coffee and muffins my grandfather had made, and there he was, sitting in a chair, holding a piece of paper on which he had written a poem for us. The poem goes like this:

’Twas Christmas morning and in the town of Atlanta nothing was moving not even Santa. So I got the paper and made me a cup and sat at the table waiting for all to get up. Not a sound could be heard, not even a peep. All were upstairs, trying to sleep. I thought to myself, “Why sleep? For you know, if you close your eyes, there’s not too many Christmases to go.”

Why sleep? When I read this poem, I think about how often I am asleep, how often I shut my eyes and am not alert to what it means to prepare for and celebrate Christ’s coming. In our Advent Bible study on Wednesday nights, we’ve been considering the words of the prophets

and of John the Baptist as they prophesied and proclaimed the coming of the Messiah. **And their audiences were hungry for this good news. They lived in eager expectation of his coming. I wonder: Do we do the same? Do we have that same sense of hunger and expectation for Christ's coming – not just His birth, but also the promise of his return?**

Perhaps there is a reason we have lost some of this hunger and sense of expectancy in anticipation of Christ's coming. When we think of Christ's coming in glory and bringing peace and restoration and newness to the world and then we see the suffering of the world and of our own lives, we lose hope. **We lose sight of the beauty and goodness God intended for the world, and it seems that the world to come is worlds away as we hear global and national stories of ongoing war, breaches in security, fallen public heroes, terrorist hearings and trials. Many in our midst and other loved ones have experienced deep personal suffering this year in the wake of the loss of jobs, loved ones, illness, broken relationships, and more. It's hard to live in expectation of the beauty of Christ's coming in the midst of the some of the ugliness of our present world.**

And yet that is exactly the context into which Christ came the first time. The background for the beauty of Jesus' birth and the angels' proclamation is one of great suffering. The angels' message of good news of a savior's birth was **not the first time this message had been proclaimed in that land.** When Caesar Augustus was born, his birth was **announced with a report of good news and the arrival of a "savior," as many political leaders were called.** There was high expectation for what Caesar would do. And certainly he did do some good for the people he governed, as his reign is known for the **Pax Augustus or Pax Romana, Roman peace.** Yet political or military peace does not always feel like true peace. **It was still an imperialist form of government complete with various decrees and**

bureaucracy. Take, for example, its latest decree: all the world should be **registered or enrolled.** **The decree called for a census that would be used for military service or taxation.** **Other translations say all the world should be numbered.** Ever felt like you were just a number, or that your identity was found only in numbers and statistics? Not exactly the most exciting proclamation. But it was part of their duty as those living under the Roman empire, both Roman citizens and Jewish people alike. Particularly for the Jewish people living under Roman rule, they longed for a different kind of savior, a different kind of peace.

In contrast to this good news of a political savior bringing political peace comes the good news of the savior bringing true peace. In contrast to an announcement filled with decrees, soldier-messengers, and the giant bureaucratic machine comes an announcement filled with music, choirs, and angels. In contrast to the dullness and dreariness of Caesar’s announcement comes the vitality and majesty of God’s announcement through the angels. “Do not be afraid, for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” God’s extraordinary news was given to the most ordinary of people, shepherds in a field, just going about their business. **In the midst of their ordinary routine, God broke through, and the ordinary glimpsed the extraordinary.**

Even the angels were overcome with the joy and majesty of God’s announcement, and they began to praise God: **“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”** That peace is not just some political or military or cultural peace – a temporary peace that lasts only for a season and then passes away. **It is the kind of peace that is the wholeness of life which God grants to all persons through a restoring of balance, a**

realizing of the goodness and beauty that God intended for the world and for us from the moment of creation. That is the hope that will be fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

Of course, it doesn't require much examination to conclude that that restoration is not yet complete. Theologians often describe the Christian life as living between the already and the not yet. With the birth of Jesus Christ, God's Kingdom has been ushered in, and yet it will not be fulfilled until Christ comes again. **In those in-between times, we, like the shepherds, glimpse the extraordinary beauty of God in the midst of our ordinary lives. It's a glimpse, and yet not the full picture, as if we were seeing through a mirror dimly, as the apostle Paul describes it.**

When James and I were at the beach this summer, we loved to watch the sunset. We tried taking a few pictures of the sunset, but somehow seeing those photos in the viewer of our camera, they always seemed to fall a bit short of the real deal. We even discovered that our camera had this "sunset setting." Surely a sunset setting would be able to capture of the beauty of the experience of the sun setting. But still it lacked some of the magic. **We photograph the sunset, but all we get is the memory of the moment itself.** Or take a concert, for example. You hear a wonderful symphony concerto, so you decide to buy the CD so you can enjoy it at home. But somehow the recording doesn't quite sound the same as the actual experience of it. **Theologian N.T. Wright reflects on these experiences: "The beauty sometimes seems to be the itching itself, the sense of longing, the kind of pleasure which is exquisite, yet leaves us unsatisfied."**

Some philosophies would argue that that itching, that longing is proof that there is no beauty in this world that all, that any beauty we think we see points us away from the present world to a different one altogether, a higher world which is the ultimate reality.

But the Biblical witness offers us a different worldview. The Psalmist sings of God's glory filling the whole earth and of beholding the beauty of the Lord. Paul says now we see in a mirror dimly, then we shall see face to face. John's Revelation proclaims that the Kingdom of the world shall become the Kingdom of our Lord. And the prophet Isaiah foretells the day when the wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. Because of that little child Jesus Christ of whom the angels sang, we claim these promise that began at creation: that God the good and beautiful Creator created all that is, and God called it good. Sure, that goodness may often appear tarnished or diluted, but it is still there in some shape or form. **And because of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom He ushered in, and the peace and restoration he will bring to completion, the peace He offers and the restoration He promises, even if we only get a glimpse of it, we know that beauty is there.**

How can we know? That's the question Moses asks. **Moses has had glimpses of God's presence on the journey** to the promised land in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. But the journey seems to drag on, and now the people have even begun to build idols to follow. So as Moses goes to the tent to meet with God, he needs some reassurance, some encouragement to press on. **In short, he wants a sign. "Show me your ways, so that I may know you and find favor in sight." The relationship between showing and knowing is a powerful one. We believe what can be shown can be known. What we can see we more readily believe. Moses doesn't want to see just any old sign, he wants to see God. "Show me your glory." Glory for Moses refers to the face or presence of God. Moses is saying, "I don't want to see just a glimpse of you enveloped by the cloud or fire. I want to see you in all your glory."**

God hears the deeper hunger in this request and grants Moses an even greater sign than he requests. God tells Moses, **“I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name, “The Lord.”** God’s response has **covenantal, relational overtones**. The Hebrew word *tov*, translated good, bears a technical, legal meaning of covenantal friendship. Having God’s goodness pass in front implies that the covenant between God and the people is being re-established. God even proclaims the name **“The Lord,”** to Moses, harkening back to Moses’ first encounter with God in the burning bush and where God first proclaimed his name to Moses. In the reminder of this first encounter, in the reminder of God’s covenant with him and the people, God recalls God’s relationship with Moses in the past, a relationship which will continue on into the future as God **faithfully fulfills God’s promises.**

God doesn’t just give Moses some tangible sign. **What will serve as a more genuine sign to Moses is not some direct view of God, but rather a reminder of the goodness of God’s character.** In other words, any seeing that Moses is granted must be accompanied by a knowing: knowing who God is and what God is about. Moses will indeed see – but he will only see a glimpse. But because that glimpse has been grounded in the context of the covenant between God and Moses, it offers the hope and reassurance for which he longs, and the promise that one day he will see God face to face.

The same is true for us. **Often the reassurance and encouragement for which we long comes not in the form of a sign, but in the knowledge and assurance of God’s covenant relationship with us through Jesus Christ.** We, too, catch glimpses of the beauty of God’s glory that filled the bareness of the manger and lit up the skies above the shepherds. We glimpse it in the beauty of the sunset. In music that draws us to God. In the face of a loved

one. In those glimpses, we, too, are reminded of the fullness of the Gods beauty that we will behold when Christ returns and we see Him face to face.

Imagine a collector rummaging through an old attic in a small Austrian town. One day he comes across a faded music manuscript written for the piano. He takes it to a dealer. They look at the music and discover that the handwriting looks like that of Mozart himself. So they call in a friend who is a pianist to play the piece. The sound of the music is just like Mozart would have written. It's energetic, it has subtle harmonious shifts, and a beautiful finale. But somehow it seems incomplete. There are places where little seems to be happening, where the piano is just keeping the tempo. There are other places where nothing is happening at all – just a long, silent pause. Gradually the group realizes what the manuscript is. It is indeed by Mozart. But it's part of a larger piece. What they have is the piano part of a larger piece involving many more instruments. They hold only a portion, a glimpse of the masterpiece the composer wrote.

N.T. Wright says that the point of the story is that the masterpiece already exists – in the mind of the composer. At the moment neither the instruments nor the players are ready to perform it. But when they are, the manuscript we already have – the present world with all its beauty and all its puzzlement – will turn out to be truly part of it. The deficiencies in the one part we possess will be made good. The things that don't make sense in the moment will display a harmony and perfection we hadn't dreamed of. The points at which today the music seems almost perfect, lacking just one small thing, will be completed.

That is the promise held out in the Biblical witness, the promise that Christ will fulfill when he comes again .

So as we wait and prepare for Christ's coming, his birth and his return, and as we live in the in-between, may we remain awake. May we be awake to and seek out glimpses of God's beauty in the ordinary and extraordinary moments of life. May we glimpse God's goodness in the faces we encounter, in the fellowship of our gatherings, in the music of our caroling. May those glimpses remind us of the restoration that Christ will bring when we no longer see in a mirror dimly, but see face to face. And may we walk in the knowledge of God's goodness and presence until that day when the Kingdom of this world becomes the Kingdom of our Lord and we all join in the great masterpiece chorus of faith.