

December 24, 2017  
Olivet Presbyterian Church  
Year B / 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Advent  
Jeremiah 33:14-16; Luke 21:25-38; 1 Thessalonians 3:9-13

## “This is What I Know”

Our Old Testament lesson this morning comes from 2 Samuel chapter seven, verses one through eleven, and then verse sixteen. Here we see God’s promise to David through the prophet Nathan that David’s line will last forever. This is one of the more significant passages in the Old Testament, and is known as the Davidic Covenant.

*<sup>1</sup> Now when the king was settled in his house, and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, <sup>2</sup>the king said to the prophet Nathan, "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." <sup>3</sup>Nathan said to the king, "Go, do all that you have in mind; for the LORD is with you." <sup>4</sup>But that same night the word of the LORD came to Nathan: <sup>5</sup>Go and tell my servant David: Thus says the LORD: Are you the one to build me a house to live in? <sup>6</sup>I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. <sup>7</sup>Wherever I have moved about among all the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?" <sup>8</sup>Now therefore thus you shall say to my servant David: Thus says the LORD of hosts: I took you from the pasture, from following the sheep to be prince over my people Israel; <sup>9</sup>and I have been with you wherever you went, and have cut off all your enemies from before you; and I will make for you a great name, like the name of the great ones of the earth. <sup>10</sup>And I will appoint a place for my people Israel and will plant them, so that they may live in their own place, and be disturbed no more; and evildoers shall afflict them no more, as formerly, <sup>11</sup>from the time that I appointed judges over my people Israel; and I will give you rest from all your enemies. Moreover the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house.*

*<sup>16</sup>Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever.*

Our second reading this morning comes from Luke's Gospel, chapter one, verses twenty-six through thirty-eight. Here we see the familiar story of the angel Gabriel visiting Mary. In similar fashion to the passage from 2 Samuel, pay attention to how God communicates in dramatic fashion with humanity. You will also notice mention of David, and David's kingdom.

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*

*<sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

Through the written word, and the spoken word, may we come to better know your Living Word Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Well, here we are, Christmas Eve today, Christmas tomorrow. The most wonderful time of the year. I know exactly how tomorrow will be for each of us, a magical day full of time with families, laughter and goodwill, everyone will be kind to one another, your aunt who voted for Hillary will hug on and joke with your cousin who voted for Trump, children will love their presents and there will be no bickering or wining for an entire twenty-four hour trip around the sun, husband and wife will be in perfect harmony, the turkey will cook perfectly, I bet it will even snow tomorrow, creating a perfect winter wonderland scene, the dog and the cat....

You know what, I can't. I can't lie here at the pulpit, during worship. Maybe Christmas will be a perfect day for you, but for a lot of people, Christmas is full of stress, and people breathe a sigh of relief when it's come and gone.

While I try hard to limit my stress during the lead-up to Christmas, I find it almost impossible. The biggest reason, it's just a busy time of year. There is nothing wrong with this fact, it just goes against the intended purpose of Advent, which is to slow down, to pause, to reflect, to be awake, to be alert. Rarely does it work out this way.

As Kylie has gotten older, and started school, I've picked up another stressor; the whole Santa Claus thing. Brittany and I made the decision to allow Kylie to enjoy the magic of believing in Santa Claus. This is not something every parent does, but it's how we were both raised, and we didn't turn out too traumatized once we determined the truth about Santa. While we want this season to be magical for our children, and for them to enjoy the story about Santa and the magical reindeer that fly, we're also working to keep everything in balance, and to make sure the kids recognize what Christmas is really all about.

Asides from walking the fine line of encouraging belief in Santa, but not taking it too overboard, I've also been thinking about what happens when Kylie comes up to us and asks us "Is this whole Christmas thing real, you know, Santa, the elves, the magical workshop, reindeer, all that stuff." I've been thinking about this after reading an article online simply titled, "My Kid is Going to Ruin Santa for Your Kid."

This article was one mother's explanation for not allowing her children to believe in Santa, and not worrying if they break the news to other children. It quickly made me realize I needed to be prepared, and so I sought out other advice online. Needless to say, there is an overabundance of essays and opinion pieces about how to handle talking to your children about Santa. I even read an article by a woman who said learning the truth about Santa was the single most traumatic moment of her childhood, as it was when she realized her parents didn't always tell her the truth. Wow. No pressure, right?

To be honest, I'm not too stressed about the whole Santa thing. If Kylie asks me, "Is this whole Christmas thing real," I think I can handle it. Unless of course, by "this whole Christmas thing," she's talking about the birth of Jesus. If Kylie asks me, "did an angel really appear to Mary, did God really come to walk among us in the form of a weak, vulnerable, needy baby? This whole Christmas thing we read about, and act out in a pageant, is this all real?" I don't think a simple yes is going to do the trick here.

You know what amazes me the most about today's story? That God interacts with humanity at all. We see this divine intervention in 2 Samuel, and we see it here in Luke's Gospel. As we prepare for Christmas Eve services tonight, and the reading of the birth narrative, what I find most amazing is this dramatic pronouncement that God is about to break into human history; that God is "moving into the neighborhood," as Eugene Peterson put's it in his paraphrase of scripture, *The Message*.

This dramatic communication announcing the astonishing news of the incarnation is what continues to stand out to me. This is what amazes me, and this is the element of this story I often struggle with. It's probably because I work with high school youth and college students, who pride themselves on being questioning and skeptical. Scripture is full of dramatic instances of God speaking to creation. Since this doesn't seem to happen in our modern era, does this mean God has gone silent? I get this question ever year in confirmation class.

"No," I always respond, "God hasn't gone silent, we just have to intentional about listening for God's voice, intentional about being alert to God's presence." This answer works for some, others find it uninspiring, and still wonder why God doesn't speak in spectacular fashion like in scripture. And it leads them to ask the question, "is this real?"

Is this real? Did an angel named Gabriel really visit Mary? Was Mary really a virgin? Did Mary really travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem on a donkey? Was Jesus really born in a lowly manger, visited by shepherds and wise men? Did Jesus really walk on water? Did Jesus really heal blindness? Did Jesus really die on a cross, and then rise from the grave? Is this real?

I can handle Santa Claus, it's these other questions that keep me up at night. What am I going to tell my kids when they ask me these questions? How am I going to witness to my faith in a compelling way, that doesn't come across as defensive, condescending, or merely superficial?

This passage we have read this morning, and the stories we'll read tonight, are nothing short of amazing. As I have been reflecting this Advent season, I keep thinking about God speaking, about nativity scenes, about angels. I kept thinking about Santa Claus, and my children. If Kylie reads this story in a couple of years, and asks me "did it really happen this way?" what do I say?

To be honest, and many of you may find this disappointing, my answer would simply be "I don't know." I don't know if an angel named Gabriel visited Mary like we hear in Luke's gospel, or if Joseph learned of this divine intervention in a dream, like we read in Matthew's gospel, or if both events happened, or if neither happened. I don't know if the nativity scene filled with shepherds, wise-men, angels, and well-behaved sheep is reality, or mere symbolism. I don't know.

I don't how it all really went down 2,000 years ago. And I'm okay admitting I don't know all the details, but what I do know is that we worship a God of love, a God who broke into human history in the person of Jesus Christ. A God who has come, who continually comes, and who will come again. A God of hope, a God of peace, a God of joy, a God of love.

When Kylie comes and asks me, "Daddy, is all of this real?" I'm prepared to say, "I don't know." I think it's the only answer I can give her. I know too many people who have been told

it's all real, and doubt is simply a lack of faith. I'm not going to do that to my child, and I will never do that to this congregation.

But after I say "I don't know," I'm prepared to say, "here is what I do know," we worship a God full of mystery, a God who can never fully be known or understood, a God who is creator, a God who is sustainer, a God who is redeemer. A God who is love.

I'm prepared to tell Kylie that I don't know how it all happened 2,000 years ago, and in all honesty, the details aren't what really matters. What really matters is that God loves us, and through Christ, God made this fact abundantly clear. That's what matters.

After each one of my kids was born I wrote a night time prayer for them. I remember saying evening prayers with my parents, and it had a big impact on me. They are each brief, and I say them with the kids at night. I'm going to read them to you all today, and I think you'll see one big theme:

Here is Kylie's:

God our maker, **loving** and kind,  
bless this day, we leave behind,  
bless all that we've done, and all those we've met,  
and may your son our savior, we never forget,  
watch over us now, all the night long,  
so we may wake tomorrow, to sing a new song.

This is Norah's:

The sun is set, the stars are hung high,  
We give you thanks for your creation, and the beauty of the night sky,  
God of mercy, **love**, and light,  
watch over us now, throughout the darkness of this night,  
be with us tomorrow as we wake,  
so we may do your will, and your kingdom help make.

Finally Asher's

God of all creation, of creatures big and small,  
Of tiny ants, fat hippos, and giraffes standing tall,  
At the end of our day, we pause to give thanks, and pray for those we hold dear,  
We especially give thanks for your amazing **love**, in Jesus Christ made clear,  
Watch over us now all through the night,  
So tomorrow we may wake, and continue to spread your great light.

No, I don't know it all. And when my kids asks me, "Is this all real?" I'll simply answer, I don't know, but here is what I do know, is that God loves you. God has a plan for you, and God has a plan for creation. This is the hope I have, this is what keeps me going, this is what keeps me striving to be a disciple and a witness, this is what keeps me active in trying to participate in the building up of God's Kingdom, and this is what brings me joy this Christmas season. God is love. This is what I do know.