

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19
Romans 1:1-7

Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
December 18, 2022
Midway Presbyterian Church

Grace and Peace

Introduction to the Psalm

Our Psalm for this Fourth Sunday of Advent is a lament to a situation in which the people of Israel (or at least a part of them) have known harsh treatment from the Gentiles. God is called on to restore the people. Listen to these words from Psalm 80:1-7 and 17-19...

Introduction to the Epistle Lesson

Our Epistle Lesson today is taken from the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Christian churches in Rome, probably from Corinth, on his third missionary journey in A.D. 57. It's the longest salutation of any of his epistles. Listen to these words from Romans 1:1-7...

Sermon

The Fourth Sunday of Advent is a final step in a season of expectation and anticipation of Christmas. Families have been awaiting the arrival of loved ones. College students, home for the holidays, have been catching up with hometown friends. Children have been eyeing the presents under the tree. People are doing that final shopping for the perfect gift—and if they find it, wonder if they can really afford it. Families who have recently lost loved ones have been looking to the coming of Christmas with questions, wondering how to make it through the season that now seems so different.

For many of us in the church this week is full of traditions and rituals with familiar scriptures, the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service with the Celebration of Holy Communion, and the Annual Christmas Joy Offering. In our homes we have our traditions—from the way the tree is decorated and where it sits, to the time of opening the presents; Christmas dinner traditions, and

whether the sweet potato soufflé has marshmallows, raisins, or pecans on top (all three sound pretty good!). Following our traditions means there is less to think about and fewer decisions to make. The familiarity bears comfort, carries the warmth of fond memories, and can embody the cloud of saints who have gone before us. But holiday traditions and familiar biblical stories also provide the potential for empty rituals. After all, we all know the story and how it ends.

To address this danger, we hear today the salutation of Paul's Letter to the Church in Rome—a church situated in the greatest city in the greatest empire in the world. The core message of this great epistle is that no one is *deserving* of salvation but that God grants it to all through *faith* in Jesus Christ.

A **salutation** is a greeting, a way of saying hello. The old proverb, “make a good beginning, and you're half the way to winning,” certainly held true for Paul as he began writing a letter to churches he had never visited.

But such salutations are something we spend less time with today in our communications. Many e-mails have no salutation at all. No “Greetings from your friend Ted Smith”—with a sentence or two added— and sometimes not even a “Hi, John.” Many never take up paper and pen, even to write a short “thank you” note.

In his salutation Paul goes on a full seven verses. It includes significant information about himself and his theology. It lays the groundwork for the content to follow in the rest of the letter. And what comes through is a clear sense of Paul's personal identity and purpose—his life being shaped by his commitment to Jesus Christ. Note that Paul does not begin by stating where he's from, who his parents are, something about his family, just:

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Romans 1:1)

The great apostle wanted to gain support for his mission work, and since he has not had any direct contact with the church in Rome, he cannot rely on a personal relationship to gain a hearing. In order to provide an introduction of himself and the gospel he proclaims, Paul first says that he is a servant of Jesus Christ. That he is “*called* to be an apostle” reinforces the involuntary nature of Paul’s work; that is, he *did not choose* himself to be an apostle, but *was chosen* by God and *set apart* for the gospel. That gospel was “promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures.” (1: 2)

We too believe that it is by God’s call, not by our initiative, that we come to belong to Christ. As Paul says in his second letter to Timothy:

[God] saved us, and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. (II Timothy 1:9a)

Not every churchgoer today feels that they belong to anyone. And Christmas may only underscore the feeling. Paul reminds us that whatever our situation, “we do belong to Jesus Christ.” For today and tomorrow and for all eternity. He has called us.

Paul understands his *particular calling* is to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles, to the end of generating the obedience that stems from faith. He declares that the circle of God’s love and care has been drawn wide. Jews *and* Gentiles, slaves and free, male and female (Gal. 3:28); Paul says, we’re all in this together—we all belong to Jesus Christ. To Christ, who invited himself to the home of the hated tax collector Zacchaeus; who welcomed little children, healed lepers, ate with those categorized as sinners.

That kind of news is like changing the Christmas menu. Like having someone new at the table. As families grow and change, it happens that there are those at Christmas dinner whom we might never have thought to invite. There may be some who are just not “your kind of people.” But according to Paul, those outsiders are God’s kind of people—just as you and I are.

Paul addresses his readers as those who *belong* to Jesus Christ. Do you remember that scene at the end of the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, starring Audrey Hepburn and George Peppard, when they have just found Holly's lost cat in the midst of a pouring rain. There Paul Varjak tells Holly Golightly that she belongs to him.

He declares, "I love you! You belong to me!"

And she responds, "No. People don't belong to people."

"Of course they do!"

"I'm not going to let anyone put me in a cage."

"I don't want to put you in a cage. I want to love you!"

And Holly says, "It's the same thing...I'm like Cat here. We're a couple of no name slob. We belong to nobody and nobody belongs to us. We don't even belong to each other."

But Paul says emphatically, "People DO fall in love. People DO belong to each other, because that's the only chance anybody's got for true happiness."

Well, that's a bit of an overstatement. But certainly relationships are important and call for loyalty and devotion. But our "belonging to Christ" goes beyond that of any human relationship. And in Christ we have his pledge of loyalty—the new covenant, confirmed in the blood that he poured out for us on the cross. Having begun his salutation by grounding his identity in a relationship, Paul ends the salutation by grounding the Roman Christians' identity in one as well. Paul belongs to Christ and that frees him to belong to others. When we read his letters, we come away with the sense of Paul's profound devotion to individuals and communities. He had never visited the church in Rome, but already he shared a bond with them because of their common bond in Christ.

One of the congregations that Paul established and with which he corresponded was the church at Corinth. In the Corinthian church there was conflict over divided loyalties. In the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians we read:

“It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul’, or ‘I belong to Apollos’, or ‘I belong to Cephas’, or ‘I belong to Christ.’”

These divided loyalties were, in Paul’s view, contradictions of what it means to be a Christian. Each and every member in a congregation is called to belong—not to a particular faction, like young or old, not to this class or that, not to the minister, but to Christ Jesus.

Whatever else Christmas is about in our wider American culture—holidays, gifts, travel, food—in the church Christmas is about Jesus Christ. Christmas is not only about baby Jesus in the manger, it’s also about the person Jesus will become as he grows in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man, a descendant of David, the Son of God. And it’s about our invitation, yes our calling, to know his grace and peace—to know that we belong to him.

Hear again the psalmist’s words from our Psalm Lesson:

Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved. (80:3)

These words are a cry for salvation, recalling the presence of God at the exodus and in the wilderness, where the glory of God “lit up the night” (Ex 14:20) and protected the Israelites from the pursuing Egyptians.

“Restore us” addresses the need, not just of an individual, but of the whole community, reminding us that even a community of faith may stand in need of God’s intervening love. The community of faith here at Midway Presbyterian Church is not different from humankind at large in terms of our need for divine grace. The distinction is that the church, the body of Christ, when

it is true to its purpose, acknowledges its need—both corporately and individually—and opens the door to Christ’s knocking and to the intervention of God’s grace and peace, praying:

Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Only then do the redemptive dimensions of Advent and Christmas become realities for us.

Paul’s final words in this lesson are an apostolic benediction, words that give expression to salvation in its fullness.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
(Rm. 1:7)

Grace and peace. So familiar. And yet so new. And so needed. By each of us, and by the community, and by the church. Grace and peace, gifts from God our Father, to us, through Jesus Christ. Gifts for today, for this week, for each day of a waning year and a new year yet to be. Grace and peace. To you who belong to God. To all who yearn to believe.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.