

4th Sunday of Advent, Year C

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 22, 2024

Micah 5:2-5a / Psalm 80:1-70 / Hebrews 10:5-10 / Luke 1:39-55

*King of the Nations, and our great Desire,
You Cornerstone who makes one of many:
as You have formed us from the ground, come now and save us.*

Four weeks ago, at the end of the year, the Feast of Christ the King, I asked you how Christ is manifested to you. The image of Jesus as King may not be helpful for some, so my sermon explored the different manifestations of Jesus in the Bible.

While today one might focus on Mary and her obedience, I was captured by our 2nd Lesson from Hebrews, which also points to obedience. But that's not what drew me to it. Who Jesus is for the Hebrews is crystal clear in this passage. While it may seem poetic to us now, to the receivers of this letter, the manifestation of Christ was as if He had done signs and wonders right in front of them.

Throughout the Letter to the Hebrews, Christ's obedience of sacrifice is the decisive factor for establishing the New Covenant between God and God's People. In Jesus' ANE Jewish context, the relationship with God was through sacrifice, specifically animal sacrifices. We heard in our 2nd Lesson:

*Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired,
in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure.*

Sacrifices were offered regularly, and the rules and reasons for sacrifices are set out in various places in the OT, mostly Leviticus. Some of those reasons for offering animal sacrifices included:

- *Forgiveness of sins.*
- *Expression of love, gratitude or of thanks to God.*

- *Cleansing from ritual impurity.*
- *And simply communing with God and becoming closer to God¹.*

The big sacrifice was for atonement. The Day of Atonement was an annual day of ritual for complete atonement for all sin, set out in Leviticus 16 (*which is one of my favorite stories in the OT for its sartorial requirements*). The offerings and other rituals were performed to avert the wrath of God for the sins of the past year and to ensure that God continued to dwell among the people. On this day, God's holiness was recognized and satisfied by sacrifice and removed any speck of God's displeasure in a person or community. And the high priest was the mediator who performed all the burnt offerings².

The recipients of this letter were Jews – as the title '*Letter to the Hebrews*' clearly indicates. So, when they heard about Jesus being the final sacrifice for their sins, they would have been blown away and fully reverent:

It is by God's will that we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

They got it! Animal sacrifices were how they related to God. But clearly, by the time of this letter, there was significant ineffectiveness of the laws and practices relating to burnt offerings. The text suggests that the sacrifices were superficial because if they were really effective, why were they needed annually?

This was how Jews in Jesus' time related to God. So, to hear:

- Jesus' *first* sacrifice was to come into the world in the first place;
- Jesus' full and sufficient sacrifice for the atonement of *their* sins, not *His*;
- That Jesus Himself was the High Priest who offered the sacrifice, which is earlier in the Letter;

¹ <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/sacrifices-and-offerings-karbanot>

² <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/library/day-of-atonement>

- *'A body you have prepared for me'* suggesting that Jesus was both the offering of the people *and* His offering of Himself,

They knew that this was the real thing: this was a fully restored relationship with God that has now guaranteed their salvation! Jesus to the Hebrews was a sacrifice for the atonement of their sins, and therefore they would always be right with God. It is no wonder why this passage is the first appearance of *'Jesus Christ'*, because that the Man and the Messiah are one is of no question to the Hebrews.

Reflecting on the strong sense of the identity of Jesus is for the Hebrews sent me down a path of who Jesus is in the Birth Narratives. What is this *beginning* of the Church's year demonstrating to us that might be different than the *end* of the year, or might be pointing us to the end of the year when we celebrate Christ as King.

I'll start tradition rather than Scripture – well, an Advent tradition around Scripture. We are near the end of the Great O Antiphons of Advent. These are 7 titles used for God in the OT which are applied to Jesus by Christians. They form the hymn *O Come, O Come Emmanuel* and have for centuries been used as the antiphons – or introductory and responsory acclamations – to the Magnificat at Evening Prayer or Evensong. They are:

- *O Sapientia: Wisdom*
- *O Adonai: Lord*
- *O Radix Jesse: Root of Jesse*
- *O Clavis David: Key of David*
- *O Oriens: Dawn of the East*
- *O Rex Gentium: King of the Nations*
- *O Emmanuel: God with Us*

Of course, that final one – Emmanuel – is indeed our focus at Advent. We are anticipating God with Us, both as the nostalgic remembrance of The Incarnation,

and as we await Jesus' Coming. Ultimately, we seek God with Us. We know that God *is* with us, but many yearn for God in corporeal form who will make all things new *now*.

For Mary, we can only conclude from today's Gospel that Jesus will be her child and will be from God. She only knows about her child-to-be from Gabriel:

You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

That doesn't necessarily align with the manifestation of Jesus to the Hebrews. And it is the angel's visit to *Joseph* in Matthew's Gospel – not to Mary in Luke's Gospel – who says that the child will be Emmanuel.

Mary may not have a clear vision of who or what her child will be. But she is very clear about who God is for her at that moment. In her praise of God as she and Elizabeth share the news of their sons-to-be, she exclaims that God:

- *Is her Savior*
- *Looks with favor on the lowly*
- *Has done great things*
- *Name is holy*
- *Has mercy for those who fear him*
- *Shows strength*
- *Scatters the proud*
- *Brings down the powerful*
- *Lifts up the lowly*
- *Fills the hungry*
- *Sends the rich away*

- *Helps Israel*

And while she doesn't include specific events in Jewish history, no doubt she drew upon what she knew of Israel's history and how much of it is attributed to acts of God. What we *can* draw from Mary's praise is that she believes God – or experiences God – to have a bias in favor of the poor and marginalized. 1C Palestine was a dangerous and precarious place even for the average person. Nothing was guaranteed: housing, food and job insecurity were the norm. The region was occupied by Roman authorities, and corruption was part of everyday life. We get a better picture of that through Jesus' teachings and His own bias toward social justice. But the few times we get a glimpse into who Jesus is for Mary His mother, we see a mother concerned for her child.

Both Birth Narratives in Matthew and Luke offer various images, persons or functions of Jesus. In addition to Mary, Jesus' mother, we have the Shepherds, Simeon, the Wise Men and Herod.

- The Shepherds, upon finding Jesus, believed what they had been told by the Angels, that Jesus was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.
- Simeon in the Temple praised God for having seen in the Infant Jesus God's salvation, a light to the Gentiles, and a glory to the people of Israel.
- The Wise Men demonstrated who Jesus was to them by the gifts they brought:
 - the gold tells us that Jesus was a king,
 - the frankincense tells us that Jesus was divine and priestly,
 - and the myrrh tells us that Jesus was to die a human death.

The Wise Men understood Jesus to be both human and divine, and they weren't even Jewish! We're not even sure that they believed in God or the same God, but they recognized Jesus' divinity and His fate.

- To King Herod, Jesus was a threat to his power and control over the people and the region.

So, the Birth Narratives are the *start* of the wide range of images, persons or functions of Jesus. And in Hebrews, Jesus Christ is the Atonement sacrifice – a sacrifice out of obedience. And what's just as interesting as the wide range of images, persons or functions of Jesus that we discover just through the Birth Narratives – never mind those we discover in Jesus' ministry – what's just as interesting is that every one of those persons in the Birth Narrative exhibited their own obedience and sacrifice:

- *Joseph took Mary as his wife and sacrificed a traditional household.*
- *Mary received the Child of God and sacrificed her reputation.*
- *The Shepherds went to Bethlehem and sacrificed their character.*
- *The Wise Men sought the Messiah and sacrificed their safety.*

So, as you await the Coming of Jesus Christ and the establishing of a New Covenant between God and God's People, how will you be obedient, and what will you sacrifice?