

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 24th, 2017
Christmas Eve
Everything Changed
Rev. John Crow

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

The fearsome red dragon Smaug was burning Laketown with impunity. While most of the inhabitants fled for their lives, Smaug's fiery breath burned all in its path—houses, buildings, and unlucky souls. Bard and his company of archers were all that stood their ground, but their efforts seemed futile. As the fire grew closer, Bard's men abandoned him. He was down to just one arrow: the black arrow that had been forged long ago by the king under the mountain. Bard notched the arrow, pulled the bowstring to his cheek, and loosed the arrow at the one gap in Smaug's scaled belly.

That is the dramatic scene from Tolkien's *The Hobbit* where the tension is the highest. One must read 236 pages to get here, and one certainly wouldn't stop reading just at this point. This is the climax of the story. We are here to celebrate Christmas, which is also a climax—a far greater one. Just as *The Hobbit* is a long story, so is history. And just like *The Hobbit*, history has a beginning, and it will

have an end. The earthly ministry of Jesus is the climax; from birth, to death, to resurrection, to ascension. Believe me, this story is a page-turner.

Nothing is the same after Jesus came, far more than I could mention in the short time that I have. And I'm not going to parse the changes that occurred as a result of Jesus' birth, death, or resurrection. I will rather treat them all together, since Jesus came primarily to die, the impact of these events can't very well be separated. And since they weren't separated in reality, I won't dwell on hypotheticals. Our relationship with each other changed forever on Christmas. Our relationship with God changed forever on Christmas. And God Himself changed forever on Christmas.

One of the many things Christ began to accomplish starting that first Christmas so long ago was the tearing down of social barriers that divide one from another. Galatians 3:28 tells us, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Jesus Christ." All those divisions that used to matter so much, are now meaningless. Being equally free to accept God's grace for all eternity will do that.

Mankind was also elevated when God became Man. No, I'm not going to launch into a deep theological thesis on how humanity entering the Trinity forever elevated us—you can find that in the thick tomes that are only read by seminary students. No, instead what I mean is exactly what Jesus said when He told his disciples, "No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15). We have been elevated through God's self-revelation that is Christ in the flesh. God is now somewhat less of a mystery than He used to be.

I know, this change actually fits in with my second point, that Jesus changed our relationship with God, but it is necessary to mention now because it makes possible another element in how our relationship with each other changed: our missionary witness. Before Jesus was born in Bethlehem, from the perspective of the Israelites, the world was divided into Jews and Gentiles. A Gentile could never become a Jew. They could be a God-fearing Gentile, but a Gentile they remained, so there wasn't much of an evangelical emphasis. I need to be careful here, though, because our reading tonight in Psalm 96 does talk about glorifying God among the nations. There are other Old Testament passages too, where God

acts in such a way as to display his power to various Gentile nations. Of course, Jonah is entire Old Testament book about a missionary effort to Gentiles.

Despite these examples, there remained an *us verses them* attitude prior to Christ. I would argue that the Old Testament examples I've just cited are the exception, not the rule, and they were precursors to, or a sort of foreshadowing of, the Church's ministry to all people. Before Christ, very few were called to be God's witness to those outside God's chosen people. Since Christ's commissioning of His disciples, it is understood that missions are the very core of what we as believers are about. We have been elevated to the role of participating in the continuing creative work of God on Earth, where all are welcome, regardless of whether one was born a Jew or Gentile.

Just as our relationship with each other changed forever on Christmas, so too did our relationship with God. This is no surprise, because Jesus is God's ultimate self-revelation. Our understanding of God and His purposes has greatly expanded thanks to sending His Son. Everything before Christ was preparing humanity for His arrival.

For example, before Christ, it was necessary to make sacrifices to God. Now, the price of sin has been paid, so sacrifices are no longer necessary. Before Christ, there were rules about being clean or unclean. Those rules served a purpose at the time, but now the emphasis is on holiness, not cleanliness. Another tremendous change since the ministry of the Messiah is the opportunity for every believer to have the Holy Spirit as a guide and counselor. Prior to Jesus sending the Holy Spirit, Scripture describes the third person of the Trinity as coming on one person at a specific time, for a specific reason, such as with Gideon, Jephthah, Saul, and David. The gift of the Holy Spirit to **all** believers radically changes our relationship with God in ways I don't even understand.

Now the doozie: God Himself changed forever on Christmas. When Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever," it means His nature never changes. However, for all eternity, Christ was spirit, then suddenly, He was flesh and blood! That's a pretty radical change, though again, not in His nature. As Gregory Nazianzen explained, "What He was He continued to be; what He was not He took to Himself." Some would say that God is perfect, and therefore cannot change, because to change perfection is to be no longer perfect. Well, I guess perfection is more like a plateau than a mountain top.

By taking on flesh, Christ experienced things He had never experienced before. He experienced physical pain, and temptation, just as we all do. He experienced abandonment within the Trinity upon the cross and even physical death. But He also experienced the kind of love and adoration that only a mother can give to her newborn as she holds him in her arms. Sure, Yahweh had received fear, and glory, and awe, and to an extent, love, that some felt for Him, but I doubt He experience the intimate kind of love of a mother. Even though new experiences surely didn't change the Godhead the same way they change us, I still think they are worth mentioning.

So as we prepare to receive the Eucharist, let us renew our commitment to live into the reality of the changes in our relationship with each other and with God that Jesus brought. Let us tear down the social barriers, maybe not of Jew and Gentile or free and slave, but how about the haves and the have nots, or white and black? Let us take seriously our missional purpose given by Christ Himself, remembering that we are now friends of Jesus, with all the responsibilities that entails. And let us rejoice in the freedom we enjoy because the price of our sin has been paid, and maintain a sense of awe that God loved us so much, that He

was willing to change for our sakes. Christmas is a time of wonder and joy, but it should also be a time when we reflect on the high calling we have in Christ. We are His Church, whom He has entrusted to help write the final chapters of His story.

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