

# *Bringing Our Selves to the Stable*

## Fourth Sunday of Advent – Purple – December 19, 2004

### Sermon Background Study

#### Scripture Passages

#### Psalm 96:1-6, 11-13 (NRSV)

<sup>1</sup>O sing to the LORD a new song;  
sing to the LORD, all the earth.  
<sup>2</sup>Sing to the LORD, bless his name;  
tell of his salvation from day to day.  
<sup>3</sup>Declare his glory among the nations,  
his marvelous works among all the peoples.  
<sup>4</sup>For great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised;  
he is to be revered above all gods.  
<sup>5</sup>For all the gods of the peoples are idols,  
but the LORD made the heavens.  
<sup>6</sup>Honor and majesty are before him;  
strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.  
<sup>11</sup>Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;  
let the sea roar, and all that fills it;  
<sup>12</sup> let the field exult, and everything in it.  
Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy  
<sup>13</sup>before the LORD; for he is coming,  
for he is coming to judge the earth.  
He will judge the world with righteousness,  
and the peoples with his truth.

#### Romans 1:1-7 (Good News)

From Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus and an apostle  
chosen and called by God to preach his Good News.

<sup>2</sup>The Good News was promised long ago by God through his prophets, as written in the Holy Scriptures. <sup>3</sup>It is about his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: as to his humanity, he was born a descendant of David; <sup>4</sup>as to his divine holiness, he was shown with great power to be the Son of God by being raised from death. <sup>5</sup>Through him God gave me the privilege of being an apostle for the sake of Christ, in order to lead people of all nations to believe and obey. <sup>6</sup>This also includes you who are in Rome, whom God has called to belong to Jesus Christ.

<sup>7</sup>And so I write to all of you in Rome whom God loves and has called to be his own people:  
May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.

*Today, we continue our Advent series: "What Will You Bring to the Stable?"  
The Cratchits brought their relationships to the stable and found Christmas peace and joy.  
Ebenezer Scrooge brought his sins and found new life. Tiny Tim brought his hurts and  
found healing. What will we find when we bring our selves to the stable? What will we find  
when we encounter the Christ-child?*

#### A servant of Christ?

It may seem a bit odd to you that the opening verses of Paul's letter to the Romans is one of the Lectionary readings for the fourth Sunday in Advent. There is barely a mention of Jesus' birth. Nonetheless, Paul speaks of the "Good News that was promised long ago" (1:2), the same "good news of great joy" brought by the herald angels at Jesus' birth (Luke 2:10). But before we get to Paul's explanation of the Good News, let's take a closer look at the beginning of this letter.

The NRSV, the NIV, the Good News and many other modern translations mislead us a bit at the opening of the letter. In the Greek, Paul refers to himself as a *doulos*, a slave or bond-servant. In

#### A Song of Good News

The theme of Psalm 96 is simple: God reigns! The psalm is a proclamation: "tell of his [God's] salvation from day to day. Declare his glory . . ." (v. 2-3). As Clinton McCann writes, "Psalm 96 articulates the good news that forms the theological heart of the book of Psalms: God reigns."<sup>1</sup> Psalm 96 is often referred to as one of the "enthronement" psalms; it is about God's rule and the joy that means for each person, each creature, and every corner of all creation.

Psalm 96 is often read on Christmas Day because it makes the point that Jesus' birth marked the coming of God's kingdom and God's rule. Jesus' birth is a royal birth, marked by Herald Angels who announce the Good News, the Glad Tidings (*evangelion* in the Greek), that a King had been born. Thus, the question posed by Psalm 96 and by Jesus' birth is the same: Will we submit ourselves to God's sovereignty?

1. from McCann's commentary on Psalms in *The New Interpreter's Bible*. 1996.

Paul's world, slaves had no social standing whatsoever, in a society where social standing mattered more than anything else. Slaves had no prospects. They were there simply to do what they were told. N.T. Wright notes that if we think Paul means some sort of "free agent who happened to work as a cleaner or butler" we miss the point entirely.<sup>1</sup> Paul has brought to the stable nothing that matters in the eyes of the world; he is simply a slave of Christ. And he is a slave that has been called by God. When Paul refers to "call" he is usually speaking of what you and I would refer to as "conversion," that moment when God reached out through the Good News of Jesus Christ to

**Living the With-God Life**  
*The Immanuel Principle*

Of the many beliefs that made the Israelites seem peculiar to their neighbors, few were more peculiar than their belief that there was one God, the Creator of the Cosmos, who dwelt with them. They even built God a house! First a moveable tent they called a tabernacle and then the temple in Jerusalem. God's people didn't think they could somehow enclose God in a tent, but they did believe that God dwelt with them in a way that God did not dwell with others.

With the coming of Christ, all of God's people – collectively and individually – are dwelling places of God. This is what Paul means when he speaks of the church and the believers as being God's temples (e.g., see 1 Cor 3:16-17 and 1 Cor 6:19-20). During Advent, we've been singing of Immanuel. When Matthew uses the title "Immanuel" for Jesus (1:23), it is because he understands Jesus is the fulfillment of the biblical story of God's everlasting intent to live with his people. "Immanuel" is a name which means "God is with us." It is this "with-God" life to which we are called and in which we will find the life we seek.

Richard Foster, Dallas Willard, Eugene Peterson and others speak of this as The Immanuel Principle of life. They note that "The Bible is all about human life 'with God.' It is about how God has made this 'with' life possible and will bring it to pass. In fact, the name Immanuel, meaning 'God is with us,' is the title given to the one and only Redeemer because it refers to God's everlasting intent for human life – namely, that we should be in every aspect a dwelling place of God. Indeed, the unity of the Bible is discovered in the development of life 'with God' as a reality on earth, centered in the person of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

1. Foster, Willard, and Peterson (all widely read at St. Andrew) are editors of a new NRSV Spiritual Formation Bible to be published in May 2005. Other editors and contributors include Walter Brueggemann, Thomas Oden, William Willimon, and Ben Witherington – all names you know if you read the footnotes of these studies! The quotes are from an unedited proof of portions of the Bible. Some of this is on-line at [www.renovare.org](http://www.renovare.org).

rescue a person from their life of sin and pull them into a new life. It is the time of their rebirth. Paul would probably speak of Ebenezer Scrooges "call" on Christmas Eve. And for what purpose has Paul been rescued/saved/called? Paul has been saved not for his own sake, but so that he might be an apostle, a messenger carrying God's Good News.

*"Promised long ago"*

When he speaks of God's Good News promised long ago, Paul reminds his readers that Jesus' arrival was the culmination of a story that began with Abraham. It is the story of God's faithfulness to his promises, what we might call God's covenant faithfulness. God had made a covenant with his people, a covenant grounded in steadfast love. God had promised to redeem creation and to restore his people to a full and right relationship with God.

Though it must have seemed to many Jews in Paul's day that God wasn't doing so well at keeping his promises, God is not only the great covenant-maker, God is the great covenant-keeper. Thus, when the people proved unable to keep their end of the covenant, which was simply to love God and to love neighbor, God would keep the covenant for them ~ and for us. The Good News is that in Jesus, God-made-flesh, God did for us what we are unable to do for ourselves. Our own faithfulness, our own believing and obeying, is the only appropriate response to God's faithfulness. When we come to the stable, we find that God has given us, just as he gave Paul, the *privilege* of vocation. Paul was given his work to do; each of us is given our work to do.

So what do we bring when we bring ourselves to the stable? Paul knows that we bring nothing, we are merely slaves-to-the-King. Even our desire to come to the stable is a gift from God. We approach this child, the King of Kings, with empty hands.

We may bring nothing, but what do we find?  
We find our rescue. We find our heart's content.  
We find our purpose. We find our Lord.

<sup>1</sup>From Wright's commentary on Romans in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, 2002. This entire twelve-volume commentary set is now in our library. It has not only the more technical commentary, but also reflections on all passages in the Bible and the Apocrypha. I recommend it highly.

## Daily Bible Readings

*(other readings from the lectionary for the 4th Sunday of Advent)*

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Isaiah 7:10-16 Isaiah brings word of a boy to be named Immanuel (see also 8:8)</p>	<p>Day 2 Matthew 1:18-25 The birth of Jesus. Matthew uses the name, Emmanuel, for the infant. (Immanuel/Emmanuel is only a spelling difference).</p>
<p>Day 3 2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 God makes a covenant with David. (This is a lectionary reading in Advent because Jesus is the fulfillment of this covenant.)</p>	<p>Day 4 Psalm 80 A prayer for Israel's restoration</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 1:46-55 Mary's song of praise.</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

## Sermon Notes

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### **Beginning January 9 – A New Teaching Series at 9:30 with Scott Engle** **Biblical Perspectives on Love, Marriage, and Sex**

Beginning in January, St. Andrew is going to offer teaching series with Scott Engle at 9:30 on Sunday mornings in Wesley Hall. These teaching series will be keyed to upcoming sermon series.

Future teaching series will look at *The Seven Last Words of Christ*, *The Apostles' Creed*, *What Methodists Believe*, and more *Kids' Stories All Grown Up!*

**Information on classes and registration for the winter Bible Academy session is now available online at [www.standrewccl.org](http://www.standrewccl.org)**

### Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. As I noted in the study, Paul opens his letter to the Christian house churches in Rome with blunt directness: he is a “slave of Jesus Christ.” What do you think he means? What might he be trying to convey to his readers? You might make a list and then discuss of all the dimensions that Paul’s “slavery” might entail. Certainly, this includes doing as the master commands. But what else? It will help us to remember that Jesus and Paul lived a society driven by honor and shame. For example, money was important only insofar as it helped a person gain social standing and respect. Yet, a slave had no social standing whatsoever. They ranked lower on the ladder than shepherds, who were themselves despised.
2. Why do you think that most English translators use “servant of Jesus Christ” rather than slave or even bond-servant? What do we lose in translation? I should note that Eugene Peterson uses “devoted slave” in his paraphrase “The Message.” Here is another piece of data: the King James Version uses “servant,” giving rise to a couple of other questions. What role does tradition play in how we translate the Bible’s Hebrew and Greek? How might the meaning of “servant” have changed from the days of King James to our own? Regardless, I think it is safe to say that “free-agent servanthood” is far from what Paul means. To whom do we really belong?
3. I introduced the Immanuel Principle in this study. We’ll be hearing more about it next year. For now, you might just spend some time reflecting on what it would mean for us to live “with-God” lives? What does the phrase bring to mind – or to heart?