

FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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REV. JAMIE NORWICH MCLENNAN©

MORE THAN THE BABY IN A MANGER

In the month leading up to Christmas, we hear the refrain “Remember the Reason for the Season.” Of course, when people say that, they are usually referring to is “Remember the birth of the baby Jesus.” In spite of all the hype for Christmas parties and presents, folks want to remind us that what we should be about is celebrating the birth of the Christ Child.

Many of us work hard to remember the birth of that child. We give meaningful and thoughtful gifts—like animals through Heifer, Int’l, or other gifts in honor of the work that is important to us. We take time to go to worship and hear the story that begins, “There were shepherds abiding in the field keeping watch over their flocks by night...” and singing the Christmas Carols that celebrate the birth of the Holy Child of Bethlehem. We watch our children in Christmas pageants and we “ooh” and “ah” over the youngest members of the church tell the story of Baby Jesus lying in a manger. We are transformed by the story...the music...the candles. The New Year comes...the Wise Men visit... The Baby Jesus is safely tucked away for another year as we put the nativity sets and Christmas lights back in their boxes, and we get on with our New Year Resolutions of spending less and exercising more.

But is that the purpose for why we celebrate Christmas and the birthdays of our children? Just so we can cross off one more celebration for the year? I don’t think so; we celebrate and mark the time so that we can see how far we have come on the journey to “becoming...;” becoming something more than what we were before. We don’t want our children to stay infants—not really; no matter how cute that 5 pound baby is, we want him to grow into a young man who is making his way in the world; we want that 7 pound baby girl to grow into the gifted young woman we pray she will be. We mark their height on the doorposts of our lives, cheer for them at sports

events, and tell of their accomplishments in Christmas letters and on Facebook. We watch them learn and grow and we celebrate their life.

Epiphany and Ordinary Time are the seasons of the church year that help us to focus on the life and teachings of Jesus—a sort of paying attention to the time marked by the “-“ on a grave marker. These seasons remind us that we need to spend as much energy focusing on the life and teachings of the man as we do on the birth of the baby and the death of the man. There isn’t as much celebration in this season, although there are moments of delight and joy. But these are more the seasons of hard work, a time to remember that the disciples of Jesus were called to not only follow Jesus around, but to do the work which he was doing.

I think this is a challenging season because the man is a whole lot harder to follow than the star of adventure that led to a baby in a manger. Jesus’ teachings often take us to places that we would really rather not find ourselves. When we follow Jesus after his baptism, we find ourselves among those who are poor...ill...persecuted...outcast.

Traditionally, we say that The Prophet Isaiah described Jesus’ life as what we have come to call “The Suffering Servant,” and we hear again that YHWH has called Jesus to serve the cause of right; leading Jesus by the hand, and watching over him. But it is not enough to just have one servant; God calls the people as well, and Isaiah says: “I have appointed you to be a covenant people, a light to the nations: to open the eyes of the blind, to free captives from prison, and those who sit in darkness from the dungeon.”

We need to move from watching a baby being born to seeing the man he has grown into; we need to move from watching the man to following in his footsteps and growing into disciples that do the work that Jesus did. Our passages for today speak about the time in Jesus’ life when he was baptized and then stepped out into the world to serve God by caring for others. That is our call as well.

Megan McKenna, theologian and storyteller uses a story to teach this message. She relates a story that she heard in Alaska when she was teaching on the

Gospel lesson for today. It is a great story that I wanted to share with you as well.

“Once upon a time there was a poor young Eskimo girl. She didn’t have enough to eat or clothes warm enough to keep the arctic cold away. One day a newspaper reporter came into the village where the little girl lived. He saw the girl’s poverty and decided to ask her a few questions. He asked her,

“Do you believe in God?”

“Yes I do,” said the little girl.

“Do you believe God loves you?” asked the reporter.

Again, the girl said, “Yes, I do.”

“If you believe in God and believe that God loves you, then why do you think you don’t have enough food or enough warm clothes to wear?”

She answered: “I think God asked someone to bring me these things. But that someone said NO!”

We are given many opportunities to serve others. Sometimes the need might be met by something as simple as food, water, and shelter.

Other times the need might be something as complicated as a changed system of government...an education...medicine or a surgical procedure. Yesterday I saw evidence of God’s healing hand through quilts and other things that you have made for one another; today we will continue the conversation on welcoming our neighbors. We have the opportunity to tell God a resounding “Yes!” as we serve.

Teresa of Avila, a 16th century mystic, used poetry and phrased our call in this way:

“Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ’s compassion to the world;
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless
[people] now.”

Today we celebrate Human Relations Sunday, particularly to remember and honor Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. We remember him as an historic leader in the civil rights movement, but we remember

him as more than that; we remember him as a person who followed in the footsteps of Christ. As Michelle Obama states it: “he was a man who lived his entire life in service to others, speaking out against poverty, economic injustice, and violence wherever he saw suffering, he did what he could to help, no matter who it was that needed him or why they were in pain.” A quote on Facebook reminded me that Martin Luther King Jr. said: "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What are you doing for others?" We are God’s people in this time and place; God calls us to be about Christ’s work and help to usher in God’s Kingdom. We are grateful for the call and God’s sustaining presence. Thanks be to God! Amen.

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Worship Services: Sundays 8:30 & 10:45 AM
Adult and Children’s Bible Classes - 9:30 AM
2723 N. 50th St., Lincoln, Nebraska
402-466-1906