

December 25, 2007

Title: "The Promise of a Child"

Text: Hebrews 1:1—4

apple seeds are certainly small and insignificant

Apple seeds sure don't look like much do they? It is hard to believe, just looking at a small, insignificant little seed, all the promise contained in that seed. Think about it for a minute. What are some of the possibilities that come from this seed, once it sprouts and becomes a tree? It provides shade. It is a place to climb-in, to retreat for solitude. It produces more apples. And perhaps my favorite, it's where apple pie comes from. These are just a few, there are many more promises contained in this one little seed. It's hard to believe there is all this promise, when you are just looking at this little seed by itself.

babies too

The same is true for babies. There are quite a few small little babies in church all of a sudden. As parents, and grandparents too, we wonder what will they become? What will they grow up to be and do? Such a small, little, bundle of poopie diapers and spit-up, arms and legs, and baby fat. Parents dream and wonder, what are all the unknown promises contained in this little body. Will they grow up to be a teacher, doctor, scientist? Will they get married and have kids of their own? What kind of person will they turn out to be? What does the future hold for this little person? There are many promises that are not yet known, but that will one day be fulfilled in this little, tiny, person. It's hard to believe, looking at this helpless, totally dependent, little infant. But it's not hard to imagine.

especially this baby

The baby Jesus was a baby just like this, small, insignificant. In his particular beginning, in the over-all scheme of things, world events and such, he was probably as insignificant as any baby could be. And on the other hand, as it turns out he held more promise in his little body than any baby ever – before, or since, or ever will be.

Luther talked about the start Jesus had in life. Given his humble beginning, you sure wouldn't expect much to come from this baby. Luther addressed women in particular, because they would understand the significance of the conditions in which Jesus was born. But even us men can see how lowly a start he had; what humble wrapping the promise came in. Luther wrote,

“Think, women, there was no one there to bathe the Baby. No warm water, nor even cold. No fire, no light. The mother was herself midwife and the maid. The cold manger as the bed and the bathtub. Who showed the poor girl what to do? She never had a baby before. I am amazed that the little one did not freeze.”

It's hard to believe, such a small little baby, born into such humble surroundings could hold such promise for the world, for us.

God comes to a world not listening

But in this little baby was God coming into our world. Hebrews says, this little baby, “is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being.” You wouldn't have guessed it, such a small little baby, but there it was.

As his mother Mary heard the wise men and the shepherds talk about her little baby, as she stood in the temple listening to Simeon and Anna talk about his future, she “treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” She must have wondered, could all these promises come from this little child hers?

The rest of the world, however, it seems wasn't overly impressed with this little baby Jesus. In fact most of them never noticed. I'm sure God coming into the world the way he did, in the humble insignificance of this baby may be why so few people noticed his arrival. But, a 2nd Century theologian, Irenaeus, says the world wasn't paying attention anyway. He wrote,

“the Lord gave a sign here below and in heaven above that man had not asked for. Man had neither hoped that a virgin could be with child and bear a son ... nor that this child would be God with us, coming down to the earth below in search of the sheep that was lost ...”

Not only weren't they listening, they really had no interest in what God was up to. The parable of the Prodigal Son paints an accurate picture of the world's attitude toward God. Here God is a father. The world as the son takes his inheritance and leaves home, seeking freedom and wanting to enjoy life. The son ends up squandering everything on wild living. The world has no time for God, and would rather go off and do its own thing.

But, God comes to the world, comes to a world not listening and not interested and speaks a word of promise. God comes quietly and insignificantly as a little baby. The promise is contained in this small little package that most people wouldn't notice, and that most people didn't see.

1 John 4:9—10 says, “⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.”

but we are invited to listen and receive, and to place our hope here

Hebrews says, “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son”. The invitation is for us to listen to this Son. You are invited, to pay attention, to see, and not to overlook the promise of this wonderful gift, wrapped in a small, plain, and insignificant package.

After expressing amazement that the baby Jesus didn't freeze to death that first night, Luther went on, “Let us, then, meditate upon the Nativity just as we see it happening in our own babies. Behold Christ lying in the lap of his young mother. What can be sweeter than the Babe, what more lovely than the mother! ... Look at the Child, knowing nothing.”

But this child, “knowing nothing,” helpless, dependent, humble and lowly:
“Yet all that is belongs to him,”

Therefore, we can take strength and comfort from this little baby. We can take hold of the promise in this newborn baby, and in that promise know,

“that your conscience should not fear but take comfort in him.

Doubt nothing. To me there is no greater consolation given to mankind than this, that Christ became man, a child, a babe, playing in the lap ... of his most gracious mother.”

Luther says this about this baby Jesus, because in him,

“Now is overcome the power of sin, death, hell, conscience, and guilt, if you come to this gurgling

Babe and believe that he is come, not to judge you, but to save.”

Luther says it well. It’s hard to believe that in this little baby is the promise for the whole world. And yet Luther expresses great comfort in knowing that this is so. It sounds like he would have it no other way. Maybe more people would have noticed if God had come into the world with great fanfare, strength, and a fireworks show. But Luther seems to prefer it this way, the way God did it as a little baby. He takes comfort in the picture of this little baby, sitting on his mother’s lap, and knowing that this is God’s Son.

what this child means

We can be comforted in this scene as well, because of all that it means for us and for the world. This little baby means, God has **not** come in judgment and wrath to destroy an evil and unrepentant world. God has instead come intent on making a new creation, making all things new; and that includes making of us new creatures. God has come to bring healing out of suffering, to bring wholeness, out of brokenness, to bring life out of death.

And so it doesn’t really matter that most of the world didn’t even notice when God came as this little baby, born in a humble stable, with only a manger for his bed. It doesn’t really matter that most of the world paid no attention when this baby, now a grown man, died on the cross for their sake.

What matters is God’s action in and for the world, God’s coming to a world that wasn’t paying attention, in order to save a world that hadn’t asked to be saved. What matters is that God was not a spectator, looking down in disgust and anger at what we had done and are doing to the world, but that God decided to become a participant in our world, to be here with us.

As the Prodigal Son returned to his home and his father, the father didn’t remain aloof in righteous anger and judgment, refusing to see his son. Instead he ran out to meet him, and in compassion, “put his arms around him and kissed him.”

You are invited to see, and to hear, that in this little baby is the savior of the world. There is a lot of promise in this small insignificant bundle. You can’t see it. But that’s the nature of hope isn’t it? We believe in what we cannot see. We believe that the promise is more important than the physical evidence. We believe in the promise of the apple pie, even though we only have a little seed. We believe that two birds in the bush are better than one in the hand after all. We believe all this, but we don’t see it. That is because we believe in the promise and we have hope. Merry Christmas.

Luke 22:14-30

¹⁷Then he took a cup, and after giving thanks he said, “Take this and divide it among yourselves; ¹⁸for I tell you that from now on I will not drink of the fruit of the vine until the kingdom of God comes.” ¹⁹Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.” ²⁰And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

²¹But see, the one who betrays me is with me, and his hand is on the table. ²²For the Son of Man is going as it has been determined, but woe to that one by whom he is betrayed!” ²³Then they began to ask one another, which one of them it could be who would do this. ²⁴A dispute also arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. ²⁵But he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. ²⁶But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves. ²⁷For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one at the table? But I am among you as one who serves. ²⁸“You are those who have stood by me in my trials; ²⁹and I confer on you, just as my Father has conferred on me, a kingdom, ³⁰so that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom, and you will sit on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel.

Hebrews 1:3 “When he had made purification for sins”

Hebrews 1:1-4

1 Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, 2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

Hebrews 8:10—12

¹⁰This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their minds, and write them on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ¹¹And they shall not teach one another or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest. ¹²For I will be merciful toward their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more.”

2 Corinthians 3:3

³and you show that you are a letter of Christ, prepared by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

2 Peter 3:

³First of all you must understand this, that in the last days scoffers will come, scoffing and indulging their own lusts ⁴and saying, “Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since our ancestors died, all things continue as they were from the beginning of creation!”

⁹The Lord is not slow about his promise, as some think of slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance.

¹³But, in accordance with his promise, we wait for new heavens and a new earth, where righteousness is at home. ¹⁴Therefore, beloved, while you are waiting for these things, strive to be found by him at peace, without spot or blemish; ¹⁵and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation.

Luke 15:11—32

Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. ¹²The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. ¹³A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. ¹⁴When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. ¹⁵So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. ¹⁶He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything. ¹⁷But when he came to himself he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired hands have bread enough and to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! ¹⁸I will get up and go to my father, and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; ¹⁹I am no longer worthy to be called your son; treat me like one of your hired hands.”’ ²⁰So he set off and went to his father. But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him. ²¹Then the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you; I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ ²²But the father said to his slaves, ‘Quickly, bring out a robe—the best one—and put it on him; put a ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. ²³And get the fatted calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate; ²⁴for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!’