

Little Invitations

By: Penny Holste

January 4, 2015. All of us, everyone, wants to know their lives have a meaning apart from the day-to-day, that they have a purpose in their lives. Pastor Penny preaches on the first chapter of John, how the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and how we are given the power to become children of God. In this season of Epiphany, what we do is share that gift by sprinkling little invitations around our lives, inviting people to know that God is with us, through this life and into the next.

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We begin this morning in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As Becky was gathering up the last of her Christmas cards, she felt a familiar pang in her heart realizing that once again, neither of her brothers had sent her a Christmas card. She and her brothers had become kind of estranged. They had become distant. Her older brother, who was always very outgoing and popular, had gone into sales -- and he'd gone right to the top and he was moving in social circles that were different from Becky's. He had several houses in different cities, and she kind of figured he was spending the holidays abroad. She hadn't heard from him in years. Her younger brother was a different story altogether. He had started drinking, and the drinking had taken over his life and his personality. And Becky had pleaded with him. She had warned him. She had loaned him money. When nothing seemed to help she just cut it off, and he kind of drifted away, and she had not heard from her younger brother for years. But as she was cleaning up and putting her decorations away, it just kept bothering her. She remembered old Christmases where they all had such fun, she and her brothers. And she wanted so badly to reconnect, so she decided to do something different. She decided she would call them. She had phone numbers and she thought they might still work.

When her older brother received the call, he was on his sailboat. He saw on his caller ID, to his surprise, it was his sister. "Becky? What does she want?" He thought about it. He was so hesitant to pick up. "What do we have in common?" he thought. "What could I say to her? This would be very uncomfortable. I'll just let it go to voice message and maybe I'll text her later." And he went back to his book and to his martini. When Becky's younger brother got the call, he was in his trailer house. And he too saw on caller ID that it was his sister, and immediately he felt guilty. The last words she had said to him were very harsh, and he had let her down so many times. He hesitated to pick up. All he could feel was shame. But then he knew that what she had said to him was what saved him, because he finally heard it, and he finally gave up drinking and had been clean for a year. And so he reached over, hoping that she would forgive him, and he picked up.

Like Becky's brothers, when God calls us -- and God does, through our conscience, through other people, through the scriptures -- when God calls us, we too are often hesitant to pick up. We know the voice at the other end might tell us something about ourselves we don't want to hear: that we drink too much, or that we should quit smoking, or that we should never talk to our spouse the way we do, or that success has gone to our heads -- whether it's at school or in the office or in sports -- it's become everything, or that we haven't become very generous in our lives. We are hesitant to pick up when God calls.

And we hear in the scripture today that God knew that would happen from the very beginning. And so God created a plan to rescue us from this disconnection with God that we insist upon. And it is in the Book of John that we hear this plan most vividly described. You know, Matthew, Mark, and Luke --

those gospels tell the story of Jesus. But John tells it and tells what it means. John gives us the plan that God had for rescuing us. John, the Gospel, is the one that we read part of together back and forth this morning. It starts out in a very poetic manner: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." And then a little later: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

Well, we can tell now where it's going. The "Word" obviously is Jesus. In Jesus, God became flesh. But why call Jesus "the Word?" That is very strange -- until you think of the fact that words are our best way of communicating. I can imagine that most of you who have been parents have looked into the face of a screaming infant and thought, "Oh, if she could only tell me what she needs." You know, words. They are the most effective way that we can share something from our heart to someone else's heart. And of course then what better thing to call Jesus, who is God's way of communicating with us? But as John goes on to describe the Word, we find out that the Word became flesh and dwelt here on the earth. But some people didn't accept the Word, while others did. And then comes, I think, one of the most beautiful passages in scripture, where John says, "But those who accepted him, who believed in his name, were given the power to become children of God."

There is not a person in this world who does not want to be connected to something bigger than themselves. They may think of it as God. They may think of it as fame or posterity. All of us, everyone, wants to know their lives have a meaning apart from the day-to-day, that they have a purpose in their lives. All of us want to know or be comforted by the thought that when we take our last breath, that's not the end of us. And here is that promise: those who accept him are given the power to become the children of God, the family of God, flesh and blood with God. That means that God promises to be with us and protect us and to be bonded to us, past the time we take our last breath in this life. So that's the plan that John reveals.

But then we go to the gospel and suddenly we come out of the cosmic realm, and we land firmly on the ground. In fact, our feet are in the dusty town of Bethlehem. And it's two years or so after Jesus is born, and he's a toddler. And Mary and Joseph are probably living in a modest home. And they have visitors, strange people. Now, of course, we always want to tidy things up in the church so we've glamorized these strange people, we've called them kings. But the Bible doesn't say that. They are called in the Greek "Magi" -- magicians, sorcerers, astrologers. And they were on the fringe of society. They were not highly regarded people. In the book of Acts, Paul encounters a Magi and calls him son of the devil. And yet these fringe people were guided by something that they were familiar with, a star, to the very place where Jesus was born.

Now, they had gone to look for him in a palace where you would look for a king. But they had come to a little dusty town, and there through the eyes of faith that were given to them, they could see in this little toddler a king. And they fell down on their knees in front of him and worshiped him, and gave him gifts. That event, of course, is called the Epiphany. It's celebrated in the church year on January 6th every year, which is Tuesday. Today we're kind of celebrating it in advance. And the time in the church year, after Epiphany to the beginning of Lent, is called the season of Epiphany. We remember that event for lots of reasons. But I think today it teaches us two things: it reminds us, as we have been reminded so many times, that God builds God's kingdom with people on the fringe, probably because they're the ones that will answer the call, they will pick up. The other thing it tells us is that God uses things that are familiar to people. The stars were familiar to the Magi. That's what they studied. And so it was a star that drew them to Jesus. In the Bible, God uses ordinary people: David, Abraham, the disciples. I firmly believe that what God wants us to hear from this account, this story today, is that we are the familiar people that draw others to Christ, that we are the stars that make that call.

Now it's not easy to make a cold call. So what we do is we sprinkle "little invitations" around in our lives. Maybe a mug that says "Christ Lutheran Church" that's on your office desk. Or maybe in your home there's a plaque, a religious plaque, that kind of describes your faith. Or maybe when someone has revealed a deep problem to you, you conclude the conversation with something like "I'll pray for you." We set out these little invitations because there is not a person in our offices, in our home rooms, in our book clubs, or on our soccer teams, who does not want to be connected to something beyond themselves, who does not want to know that their lives have meaning and purpose, who does not want to be assured that their lives will have meaning past the time they take a breath. And so we leave these invitations knowing that sooner or later, someone will come up to us having seen these little hints and say something like, "My wife and I are kind of having a hard time, and we've been thinking about finding a church." Or, "We are looking for a place to baptize our child." Or maybe just, "You know, I've been feeling that there must be more to life. I've been feeling that I'm missing something. You go to church. Why do you do that?"

And then that's when we need to have a very short statement about what it means, what our faith means. And we've heard some beautiful ones over this last year, as some of you have done the welcome at the beginning of worship. We've heard people say that "I come to church because this is my anchor" or "I come to church because I want to be in this community" or "I come to church because this is where I know I'm forgiven" or "I come to church because I need to be here." It's not easy to talk about our faith. And I'm as shy as any one of you to talk about it outside of these walls. But we are not being asked to sell people something, to promote something, to push an idea on someone, or to disrespect their spirituality. God works in mysterious ways. God worked through sorcerers today. What we are simply doing is inviting people to experience what we experience, to be in the family, to be flesh and blood with God, to know that God is with us through this life and into the next. All we're doing is inviting people to be what God, by God's grace, has allowed us to be: children of God.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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