

“Promised Stars: Christians”

Philippians 2: 12-18

I struggled with this sermon title this week. I didn't pick it out. It was the second in the series that goes along with the theme for our Advent season. Don't get me wrong. I'm loving the idea of creatively telling the story of Advent through the stars but I finally realized why I struggled. It is that word “Promised” and the title, “Promised Stars: Christians”. What exactly is that suppose to mean? Promised Stars?

To be honest, I struggled with this title because an entitlement mentality immediately came to my mind, thoughts that said-because we are Christians, we are promised certain things; we are entitled to certain things: health, wealth, blessings, all sorts of good stuff and none of the bad things in life. And if bad stuff happens, then well, we didn't have enough faith or we must have done something to make God mad.

This morning, when we say, Promised Stars: Christians, is this what we are claiming and proclaiming? Is that the good news that we are called to bring a world that is hurting and in need of some good news? Is that the best that we can do during this time of hope, peace and joy?

Unfortunately, when it comes to the language of our faith, it is easier to use the language and images given to us by this world than the gospel message because, we know that the gospel message doesn't make a lot of sense to this world that tells us that 2 plus 2 will always equal four. We know that the gospel message seems illogical to people who have never experienced it because the gospel message is not about getting ahead, it is about getting right with God by proclaiming and claiming the message that the weak will be made strong and the strong will be made weak; the poor will be rich and the rich will be made poor. The gospel message tells us that the lion will lay down with the lamb and a little child will lead them. The gospel message tells us that our God, "Emmanuel" came not as a mighty king with riches and power but as a helpless baby lying in the manger.

It is easier to grasp the entitlement mentality of this world with its certain answers than it is to grasp and understand the good news that defies and breaks all the rules and leaves us with more questions than answers. It is easier because at least we have words or ideas to describe something as mysterious as God. It is easier for us to grasp on to this entitlement mentality with its certain answers when we live in a world that is filled with chaos, that is filled with hurt, that is filled with sorrow, that is filled with darkness.

As people of faith, We live in a world that tells us that shows us, that big is always better, that for us to have success and to be considered winners, we must come in first and be better than other people. We must always get ahead in this world even if it is at the expense or detriment of others. The world we live in tells us that if we stumble or fail, then it must have been something we did or didn't do. If something bad happens, this world explains it by using the logic that we are simply failures.

So that got me asking myself-is this what it means when we claim or proclaim that we are promised stars, that we are Christians?

Thankfully, after much prayer, frustration, and conversation with the Epistle reading this week, I don't think this entitlement mentality is what we mean when we say or hear the words: Promised Stars: Christians today. And my friends that is the good news and joy of the Advent season, good news that tells us that when we proclaim and claim the name, Promised stars, we are called to live out our faith that shines like stars, faith that shines like stars, giving light and joy, chasing away the darkness that fills our world.

Good news that can be found in our Scripture today in the form of a letter that Paul has written to the church community at Philippi. He is responding to their questions of why: Why is it important to be a Christian? Why is Paul sitting in jail, possibly awaiting a death sentence, if he is supposed to be blessed? Why didn't

God save Jesus from the cross if he was the Messiah? Why is there so much suffering if God came to save the world? Why doesn't God just come and solve all the problems? Why are people in our community telling us that we are wrong and that God' really doesn't care? Why, God, why?

Pretty big theological questions, questions that we still ask today because just like the community at Philippi, we want and need answers. We want and need some understanding to these things that don't make sense. We want and need reasons to why 2 plus 2 don't always equal four, especially when this world tells us that it should every time.

So Paul sits down to write this letter, explaining that really the community of faith at Philippi is asking the wrong questions. They are thinking in terms and language of this world, not thinking in terms and language of God and the gospel. He reminds them that the Gospel message is unexpected and turns this world upside down. For example, Where this world sees him bond, chained in prison captured and awaiting death, Paul says that his suffering is an opportunity to share the Gospel message and to show how truly free he is because of God's saving and liberating grace. Where this world is asking why is there suffering and where is God, Paul says that what the community of Philippi should see is an opportunity for the Gospel to come to life because Paul knows that it is in the suffering that

God can be found, wrapping God's arms of comfort around those who suffer, giving them courage and strength, filling them with light and with hope.

Paul reminds the community at Philippi that their calling is to live in ways that are appropriate to the gospel, a gospel of grace, a gospel of love, a gospel of hope, and a gospel that is strengthened within the bonds of community. They are to live out this faith with fear and trembling, meaning living lives that are full of awe and wonder for all the real blessings that God has poured out upon them, such as grace, peace, hope and comfort.

As Paul continues to write this letter, he tells them that it is all about attitude when it comes to living out the Gospel. As Christians, we are called to be humble and to do all things without murmuring and arguing. And when he says this, he is not telling us to hang our heads down and let the world step all over us. No, when he uses these words and phrases, he is using them as way to try capture the image of servant leadership and to remind them that as people of faith we are called reminding us of the example that Jesus give to us when he took a basin and gently washed each of his disciples feet. We are called to be servant leaders, seen as people who are real and authentic in our faith and our actions, as people who are comfortable admitting dependence on God, as people who lives out lives of hope and peace in response to God's grace, as people who shine as bright as the stars, giving light to chase away the darkness.

When Paul tells the community at Philippi that they are to work out their own salvation with fear and trembling, he is not telling them that they are on their own. Quite the opposite! Paul is telling them not to worry about the details, to live out an obedience that is a faithful following of what they have heard and seen as Christ's example, leaving the outcome to God. Paul is calling them to live out their faith, to be examples, to be symbols of hope and light to a world that is hurting that is broken, that is in need of some good news.

He does and says all of this in his letter to the community at Philippi and for us today because he understands that the key to the Gospel of God's grace is realizing and accepting that it is only by serving do we truly understand the concept of servant leadership. It is only by living out lives of compassion and love do we truly understand the full extent of God's love and compassion for us. It is only by sharing and showing God's promises of hope, joy and comfort through our lives do we truly understand the power, the courage, the gift that God's promises really are for us as people of faith.

It is only by living out a faith that shines like the stars that we can show this world and make this world understand that the Light of the Word, God with Us, the Prince of Peace will overcome the darkness and bring healing and wholeness to all of God's creation.

It is only by sharing the promises of God do we truly become the promised stars, do we become promises of hope, promises of grace, promises of mercy, promises of joy for all of God's people. Our faith shines like stars, bright, full of light because we've experienced and we are called to share the promises of God.

Because As promised stars, We understand that when God spread the stars out across the sky, it was a promise to all of God's creation that light will overcome darkness. Because as promises stars, We understand that when God showed Abraham the stars at night and said that Abraham's descendants would be as numerous as the stars, it was a promise to all of God's people that light will overcome the darkness. Because as promised stars, We understand that when Paul encourages us to have faith that shines like the stars in a world that is filled with darkness, hurt, hate, and violence, it is a promise that light will overcome the darkness. Because as promised stars, we understand that the promises of God fill our lives with light, with hope, with peace, and most importantly, with joy! And these promises shine bright as the stars at night as reminders that the light will always overcome the darkness because God sent us the Light of the World in God's son, Jesus Christ.

Because as promised stars, we understand the power of the light and it shines brightly through us today and always. May we open our hearts and minds to the story that the promised stars are telling us. Amen.