

Does it Make Any Difference? 2022
 Psalm 130:1-8 Romans 1:1-7

Psalm 130 (New Revised Standard Version)

Out of the depths I cry to you, O Lord. Lord, hear my voice! Let your ears be attentive to the voice of my supplications! If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, Lord, who could stand? But there is forgiveness with you, so that you may be revered. I wait for the Lord, my soul waits, and in his word I hope; my soul waits for the Lord more than those who watch for the morning, more than those who watch for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great power to redeem. It is he who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities..

Romans 1:1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Today is the 4th Sunday of our Advent preparation for Christmas,
 and with so much going on that needs to be accomplished,
 for many it can be a long, exhausting & stressful journey.

A young pastor leading her church through Advent for the first time,
 writing about the many extra church activities of the season,
 all the stress & necessary preparation, the extra effort & work,

asked the Internet pastor's discussion group I'm in,
**if it really matters, if it's worth it,
 and does it actually make any difference?**

I think that's an honest and fair question to ask,
 and in some areas of life it's fairly easy to answer...

... for example,
 after watching a movie, too often I walk out of the theater
 thinking, "That was so not worth my time and money"
 or after a mediocre meal at an expensive restaurant
 complaining, "That was definitely not worth the price."

So how about Christmas and all the many extras?

We put a lot into our church & Christmas celebration, is it worth it?
 Does it really make any difference to anybody,
or is it more about sizzle than substance?

The Apostle Paul's letter to the Christians living in Rome
 helps me focus on **why Christmas matters and makes a difference.**

Saul, as he was known before he became Paul, the Apostle,
was a brilliant Bible scholar, a rising-star Pharisee,
from the right family-heritage and background,
and he had received the best possible education.

He was chosen and sent by the Jewish leaders from Jerusalem
with authority to arrest any Christians found in Damascus,
and stop the spread of the Gospel message about Jesus.

But along the way he encountered the risen Jesus Christ,
which changed everything and he was never the same again,
which is the point and why **we celebrate the birth of Christ.**

Christmas celebrates that in Jesus Christ, God became human flesh,
or as Eugene Peterson describes it,
“in Jesus, God came to live in our neighborhood.”

That encounter changed the direction of Paul’s life from then on.

The Apostle Paul spent the rest of his life and passion
teaching and preaching the Gospel, starting churches,
and spreading the Good News about Jesus Christ.

Paul wrote the book of Romans toward the end of his life,
and it’s his most succinct and most fully-developed theology,
trying to clarify & explain himself to Christians he’d never met.

Certainly the Church in Rome had heard about Paul’s ministry,
probably rumors and stories about his struggles & conflicts,
primarily about the inclusion of gentiles into the Church.

Paul wanted to them to understand the Gospel message he proclaimed,
so they would recognize that they all shared the same faith,
and be willing to support his missionary journey to Spain.

And because Paul is trying to explain his theology to strangers,
and how his faith in Christ motivates him in his ministry,
Paul begins his letter by describing more about who he is.

Notice it isn’t a list of impressive credentials & accomplishments,
but he defines himself by the grace and call of Jesus Christ. vs. 1

Paul, **a servant** of Jesus Christ, called to be **an apostle**, **set apart** for the gospel of God ...

a servant of Jesus Christ

In Greek the word servant is the same as the word that means slave.
It’s a humble position under the master’s authority,
which meant that every part of that servant/slave’s life
was entirely at the disposal and call of his or her owner,
and **for Paul everything else flows from that one truth.**

called to be an apostle

Paul didn’t just decide on his own that he should be an apostle,

but was called by the Creator of the universe to faith,
to the mission of spreading the Gospel to the gentiles,
gifted and placed where the Lord wanted him to serve.

It was all entirely God's choice and doing, not Paul,
because when he encountered Jesus on the road to Damascus,
nothing in Paul's life would ever be the same again.

set apart for the gospel of God

To be set apart by God is to be specifically called by God,
which means that he was also **equipped for the task by God.**

Whenever it is, that God has called someone to do something,
that means that God created them **with the capacity to do it**,
and has been preparing them **all along the way to do it**,
and will surely enable, and strengthen, and encourage them
as they follow and obey the will, purpose & guidance of the Lord.

Just as Paul was equipped for the ministry to which he was called,
**so too we have been and are being equipped to accomplish well
whatever tasks and mission to which we have been called.**

Grace is our assurance that God's promises do apply to each of us,
and that graciousness of God freely given through Jesus Christ,
is the reason why we celebrate the birth of Jesus at Christmas.

Christmas celebrates the victory of God's gracious love,
which makes all the difference in the world,
and is the truth around which we can build our lives.

Jesus is the disclosure of divine love and favor toward all.

In Christ, God offers new life, healing & hope in abundance,
available to everyone God has created, therefore Psalm 130:7

... hope in the Lord! For with the Lord there is steadfast love, and with him is great
power to redeem.

Paul explains that the hidden OT mysteries and promises of God
have been revealed and fulfilled in the Gospel of Jesus,

and God's covenant with David was fulfilled by Mary's child, vs. 2-3

... which he (God) promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the
gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh...

The message we are called by God to live, to reflect and make known,
the wonderful truth that Christians are called to proclaim,
is that through Jesus Christ, fully human and fully divine,
God loves us with unearned & undeserved mercy and grace...

... **and I know of nothing in this world,**
that better illustrates that truth about God's gracious love,
than the baptism of an infant or a young child.

Baptism is a sign and declaration of God **already at work in our lives**,

and it serves to remind us of God's promise and covenant,
as it reassures us of God's life-transforming-healing-love,
as we are invited to live and to grow in that relationship.

**For Presbyterians,
baptism is a window through which we can see the grace of God,**

**for what better than the baptism of an infant or child to symbolize
and bear witness to the truth that God's love lays claim to us,
even before we have knowledge or can respond with any faith?**

In faith, we believe God will accomplish as God has promised,
so we have claimed God's love and grace, on Sophia's behalf.

That claim was made trusting entirely upon God's faithfulness,
that God chooses to show love and favor, mercy and grace,
based entirely upon God faithfulness and not our worthiness.

We claim God's promise of love and grace in the mystery of baptism.

Infant baptism uniquely gives expression to the ultimate truth,
that we are saved by grace, by God's grace alone
quite apart from our own good works or any deeds of faith.

The babies and young children that we baptize
haven't repented or done anything to deserve God's love,
therefore, whatever it is that happens at their baptism
it's entirely God's doing, and it's all about God's love.

Baptism is a wonderful mystery that signifies
something awesome that God has already decided and accomplished,

and in response, we, parents and congregation, **vow that we
will faithfully make that truth of God's love known to them,**
and in a spiritual sense, let them stand on our shoulders.

**The essence of the promise that we make before God in baptism
is to provide an environment that reflects God's love and mercy
so that our children will learn and respond to God's grace.**

When our children receive, feel and experience love and acceptance,
and they experience welcome and worth and a place in this church
as a part of our church's shared mission, programming and ministry,
that makes the truth of God's love, compassion & grace
become more real, believable and concrete to them.

The task of both family and Church, is to demonstrate and model
the truth and depth of our Christian faith by both word and deed,
for it is by how we live that we truly instruct and prove
that our words of faith have integrity and real meaning.
**Grace makes sense to them, that God must love & care about them,
when they have felt loved and valued in God's house by adults.**

I believe that the single most significant task of this church
is to create a caring, **faith and hope nurturing environment**

where we do faithfully reflect God's gracious love
by welcoming all and being attentive to human needs.

We are called to be a community which **forms Christian character**
which means that here, all people should experience God's love.
Though a young child may not be able to understand much theology,
even the tiniest infant or toddler can tell
if they are loved, welcomed and accepted here...

... and though they may not be fully aware of who God is,
yet they can recognize expressions of God's love,
and they can tell if other people want them here or not.

Therefore, as we read in Hebrews 10:23-25

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Our call is to intentionally and actively demonstrate
God's love and grace and truth in every way we can by serving
as **caring dispensers of the Good News about Jesus,**
and nothing that we'll ever do will matter more than that!

And if we are faithful to the vows and promises we've made,
as we have promised before God and one another
to provide an environment of God's truth and grace,
then when someone asks our children, "Who are you?",
they will know to answer with trust and certainty,
"I am beloved, one who is loved, cherished and called by God."

**And from that life-changing and life-redirecting truth,
may we celebrate with joy and wonder, God's gracious love
in the birth and blessing of Jesus our Lord, our Savior, vs. 7**

To all God's beloved...who are called to belong to Jesus Christ...who are called to be saints: *Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ*"

We celebrate the amazing lengths to which God extends grace & welcome
just to bring us back home to a life that really does matter
and toward bringing peace, hope, joy and love into our world,

**which is also the true meaning, message and point of Christmas,
which is what makes Christmas powerful, meaningful & worth it.**

As we'll sing in just a few minutes,

"O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray, cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell; O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!"