

Time after Pentecost
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Malachi 3:104; Psalm 141;
Acts 13:13-26; Luke 1:57-80

Please pray with me: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our rock and redeemer. Amen.

“Here’s the picture!” My friend Beth had just returned from a visit to Chicago. It was a business trip, but she had taken some time to visit some of the tourist places in the city. One of those places was the Museum of Contemporary Art. Now, I need to confess that modern art is not my favorite type of art. I admire people who can enjoy a painting because it evokes feelings, or uses colors or materials in a new way. From my very limited perspective, if it doesn’t look like something familiar, I just move right on.

Well, the picture Beth showed me was a piece of modern art she had seen at the museum. It had to do with church, so of course she figured I would be interested. Surrounded by sculptures made of bubble gum and old doors was a piece of art entitled “America’s Hopeful Future”. The artist, Erika Rothenberg, uses pieces of everyday life and transforms them into provocative works of art. In this case, Rothenberg used a small church bulletin board – you know the ones I’m talking about – every few inches they have crevices where you can place and re-place those white letters that spell out announcements. With white letters against a stark black background, she spelled out the activities in one local congregation:

EVENINGS AT 7 IN THE PARISH HALL

Monday – Alcoholics Anonymous

Tuesday – Abused Spouses

Wednesday – Eating Disorders

Thursday – Parents Without Partners

Friday – Say No to Drugs

Saturday – Singles Support Group

Sunday 9 a.m. sermon
“America’s Hopeful Future”

Hopeful? This piece of modern art hit me right between the eyes. Rothenberg on one board listed many of the social problems we wring our hands about here at Trinity. Many of us lament the relationships crumbling around us. Addiction is rampant because people are self-medicating with food, alcohol and drugs. People are lonely and looking for companionship. Financial resources don’t seem to protect us. Power and social status don’t protect us. We are often burdened with care.

Luke’s gospel today tells the story of a group of people in the same fix. The social problems were different, but the story is virtually the same. People in Palestine were burdened by care.

The Jewish people were governed by occupiers. They lived at the inclination of Rome. Cause trouble, and Rome dealt with the rebels, swift and sure. Most people were very poor. Mostly they struggled to maintain their pride and dignity as a people.

Enter Gabriel, the angel. You know the story. He visits two people: Zechariah, an old priest who is serving at the temple, married to Elizabeth, an old woman well past child bearing age; and Mary, a young girl engaged to be married to Joseph. Gabriel tells both people incredible stories: Elizabeth will conceive in her old age; and Mary will be the mother of God's son. Both important children in God's plan. Zechariah takes some convincing, so he loses his voice until the promise about Elizabeth's child is fulfilled. The gospel story today begins when Elizabeth gives birth.

I remember all the celebrating when my sister gave birth to my niece. My family was particularly excited because she was told she could not have children. We were anxious through the entire pregnancy, and we all prayed hard for nine months. When Theresa entered the world, there wasn't a baby who was cuter or more wanted . . . that is, except for my two, Stephanie and Kristen. Rejoicing was probably an understatement in Elizabeth's case as well. Elizabeth knew she would not conceive; she was too old. What a miracle!

As the law required, Zechariah and Elizabeth take the baby to be circumcised and at that point receive his name. It was the custom to be named after dad. Both Elizabeth and Zechariah are insistent: the boy is John. That's what God wanted. True to God's promise, Zechariah gets back his voice and begins to praise God.

Now I know this is hard to believe, but I tend to be a bit verbal. Now after nine whole months of not being able to speak, I don't know that my first reaction would have been to praise God. Maybe that's why Zechariah had to lose his voice in the first place. Maybe listening is an important part of trust. Maybe you and I need intentional quiet time in order to let go and know that God is present with us right in the middle of our challenges. Zechariah obviously benefited from forced silence – he moved from doubt to praise!

The neighbors and relatives are understandably a tad overwhelmed by the evidence of God's compassion. Not only had Elizabeth delivered a healthy son, but Zechariah had his voice back! God's compassion and power are hard for us humans to comprehend, so everybody who heard the story was filled with fear; they knew this baby was special. What then will this child become?

We've all asked that, haven't we? We hold our sons and daughters, our nieces and nephews, our grandchildren – look lovingly in their eyes, and we wonder. We ache when our babies have a physical or mental challenge that we know will cause them problems in the future. What does the future hold? We pray. Babies are bundles of potential.

What will this child become? In John's case, we have the benefit of hindsight. John grew to be the prophet of the Most High. He went before the Lord to prepare His way. God's plan is clear. God raised up a mighty savior as promised. And that savior is not John. John's purpose is to prepare the way for Jesus, the savior. God's people will serve God without fear in righteousness

and holiness. The dawn from on high, Jesus the light of the world, will break upon us to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.

Those are big, fancy words, aren't they? Sometimes though, even today, I sit in darkness and in the shadow of death. Rothenberg's church bulletin board speaks to some of my experiences and those of people I know, just as I bet it speaks to each one of us in this room. And it's not the titles of the groups so much, as the struggle, pain and loneliness we can read between the lines. The contrast is striking between the misery of titles like "Alcoholics Anonymous" and "Spouse Abuse" and the sermon title of "America's Hopeful Future". Is there a hopeful future for us? We look around and we wonder. What, then, will you and I become?

The gospel story today assures us once again that our hopeful future is in God. Our God is a personal God. Rather than being concerned with nations, God is very concerned with each one of us individually. We are baptized, claimed as one of God's own family. We are loved and cared for exactly the way we are, right now. We are redeemed, brought into right relationship with God, through the cross. And while we grow and are transformed by God's gift of grace, we are invited to help spread the word!

We have a story that needs to be told. There is a God who is present in the midst of our challenges and struggles. As John was the prophet for the Most High, we are called to be the hands and feet and voices of Jesus for the members of our faith family here at Trinity, as well as those outside our doors. We support each other through the tough times and create a community that reflects God's love for the world. Then we take the strength and nurturing we've received here back into our families, neighborhoods and workplaces.

Last Sunday some of us came right here into the nave in between services and had a conversation about new directions for mission and ministry for Trinity. When I walked around Camp Hill talking with people, 64 people out of 100 did not know anything at all about Trinity Lutheran Church here in Camp Hill. Sixty-four out of 100. What, then, will we become? The possibilities are endless when we begin with prayer, become clear about how Jesus makes a difference in our lives and how we fit into God's story. Then hold onto your hats! The adventure is just beginning.

Amen.