

Romans 1:1-7 Saints
December 22, 2019

I went to the Polaris Mall last week because it is Christmas time, and shopping at the mall and seeing all the lights and decorations and, at least once, joining in the traffic and hustle and bustle of the season has been a part of the tradition all of my life. The thing about the mall is that it is one of the last remains places to which everyone went. It was an emporium of people. It perhaps still is, but to a lesser degree. Like many others I don't go there often and I don't know if I will go back back again until next year, who knows, maybe not then.

With all the retail stores that are not at the mall and with the internet it is not necessary to go there. It was not as crowded as I remember it, the line to see Santa was not that long, the parking lot not very full. The traffic was not even that bad.

Shopping and decorations and busyness have long been a part of our culture's Christmas tradition. All along we have known that Christmas is big money and commercialized, and kind of regimented. We can do it without giving it much thought.

It seems to have a plot like any one of hundreds of Hallmark Christmas movies, which all have the same plot, and are hard to tell apart. Maybe that is what I am trying to explain. Christmases have gotten hard to tell apart.

Romans

The text in Romans 1 seems odd for the 4th Sunday of Advent, because on the surface it doesn't seem to be about Christmas at all. In it Paul introduces himself to the church at Rome, a congregation he had never met before, and filled primarily with, one would assume, people he had never met. This lack of familiarity makes Romans somewhat unique among all Paul's letters, for even if it had been a long time and there were all kinds of new people Paul did not know, all the other letters were written to churches that had a history with him, mostly of which he had been the founder.

So this letter was not the 50th time around the block either for Paul or the recipients of this letter, it was the first. In it he goes to much greater length than in other letters to explain what faith in Jesus Christ means, and to explain the practical implications in greater detail.

Protestants have always emphasized Paul's letters over the rest of the New Testament and Romans over the rest of Paul's letters. The focus has been mostly on the substance of the letter, such as in chapters 3, and 7, and 8.

Our text today is the almost standard greeting for a letter in that day, and in it we *do* find some theology that can be meaningful at Christmas time, and maybe enough to shake us out of our theological grooves, if not our holiday schedules.

Christmas in Paul's Letter?

In this greeting, we find Paul's commitment to be identified as Christ's servant. He says he is called to be an apostle. He says that he has been "set apart" for the gospel of God, the good news of God. He says that this gospel had been promised in the Holy Writings, regarding God's Son.

And then, and this is where we run into a connection to the gospels of Matthew and Luke and their birth narratives, he says that according to the flesh, which means as a human being, Jesus was a descendant of David. Through the Spirit of Holiness, by his Resurrection from the Dead, he was declared the Son of God. And there you have it. The Incarnation in Paul's terms, right there in the greeting.

It is important to read the next sentence or two. They amount to a thesis statement regarding what all the fuss is about. He writes:

"Through him and for his namesake, we received grace and apostleship to call people from among all the Gentiles (we talked about the meaning of "Gentiles" last week) to the obedience that comes from faith." And then he says, "And you also, are among those who belong to Christ Jesus." This is what Christmas is all about, salvation has come for the human race.

2,000

It has been 2,000 years, almost, since Paul staked his claim and believers have been talking about it ever since, and talking about what it might mean. So if there is some relevant meaning in this message, then then is related to the meaning of Christmas. I think there is meaning in it. I don't think there is something in the mall or the lights or the decorations, or in the music or the hustle or the bustle. I don't think we will find it in the news of the day, or when we look out upon this world and see how much in need of gospel news it still is.

One has to admit that the first 20 years of this century we call the 21st, have been a little rough. If I may say, what has been rough about them is in part that they have risen up the prospect of catastrophe in new ways and yet that the catastrophes themselves don't seem to happen.

Even the bad things like 9/11, or the economic crisis of 2008, or the rise of ISIS, or any of dozens of hurricanes, just linger, sometimes fading in their significance but never quite going away. We carry them around like a heavy weight, never able to escape the sense that some ultimate tragedy might yet still occur.

Answers

We are offered answers. Some them involve political or economic re-organization. Elections and

administrations come and go, each claiming to be able to solve the problems once-and-for-all if only they would be given the space to fully implement their programs. Some of the answers involve science and technology as ways to solve problems and increase economic gain. Some of the answers involve education and the belief that ignorance is at the heart of the problems.

We should never give up on these kinds of answers, nor should we put our ultimate faith in them either. The sense is that at best these are partial answers, anyway we do not agree on them and feel stymied because our disagreements cause us to fail to accomplish anything. What does the gospel mean in our times?

So there is the answer of the gospel, this same gospel that Paul was set apart to proclaim. The same gospel that was born into the world when Jesus was born.

There are some things to say. The gospel means that life is good, though evil and sin is real and pervasive. It means that God has loved and accepted each person, any answer that dis-regards the well-being of any person, is not a gospel answer. It means that forgiveness has been given and reconciliation and redemption are the will of God.

The gospel means that we should not be discouraged, we are kept by the conviction in the victory of goodness and the possibility of the transformation of the human heart. It means that we can work together to combat the evil that is in our hearts and in the

world, even when we are not all that sure about each other, stumbling along but strengthened by each other's presence and by God's Grace.

And finally, it means that we are called to be "holy" in this world, even at the mall where all the people are. That is what a saint is. It is a ridiculous notion. Nevertheless, that is what the text says. At the very least it must mean that we are not so caught up in the problems of our time that we can't be salt and light in them, that we can't show forth grace and peace in them. And love.

May you and yours have a blessed and meaningful and very merry Christmas!

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