

Big plans
Ephesians 1:3-10
December 21, 2008

You remember what the angel of the Lord said, what the angel of the Lord said to a handful of shepherds, passing the night the same way they passed every night, doing their job, tending their sheep and their goats ...

Behold! I bring you good tidings of great joy!

Great joy! Are you prepared to handle great joy? Or are you content with being moderately happy?

Most of us would settle for a safe holiday and some warm and pleasant times with family and friends. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would settle for a steady job with health insurance and enough income to get by. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would settle for a friend or two who appreciate our sense of humor and overlook our faults. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would settle for a revived economy and a nation kept safe from its enemies. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would settle for living out our days, however many we have may, with good health and enough to do to keep us interested. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would settle for having our sins forgiven. But God has bigger plans!

Most of us would surely settle for the assurance of a life to come, for the promise of eternal life itself. But God has bigger plans!

What did the angel of the Lord say?

Behold! I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to ... all the people!

All the people! Good tidings to all the people. Not just to you and me, or to our families, or to the members of our church, or to the citizens of our nation or any group of nations, or to the people who choose to celebrate Christmas, but to all the people! Good tidings to all the people!

And what are those good tidings?

Today, in the city of David, your Savior is born, Christ the Lord!

The birth of Jesus -- Christ, Messiah, mighty king, prince of peace -- is the good news. And what will this Christ do for all the people? What is God's plan?

God's plan, which God will complete when the time is right, is to bring all creation together, everything in heaven and on earth, with Christ as head ...

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself ...

Reconciling the world. Bringing all creation together. Those are big plans!

Why is this good news? It is good news because we live in a world deeply divided, a world deeply against itself and a world deeply divided from God.

The depth of those divisions, even within our own nation, was made clear to me once more this past week. If you have been following the news, you will know that I was not selected to deliver the prayer of invocation at the inauguration ceremonies for our next president! That honor went to Rick Warren.

You may know Rick Warren as the author of the best-selling spiritual guidebook for Christians entitled *The Purpose-Driven Life*. Or you may know him as the pastor of Saddleback Church, a southern California mega-church with more than twenty thousand members. Or you may know him as the evangelical leader who hosted both presidential candidates for a conversation about politics and faith. Or you may know him as a new kind of evangelical activist, unwavering in his opposition to gay marriage and the right to abortion, but also advocating for victims of poverty and AIDS and calling for action to decelerate global warming.

He, Rick Warren, was chosen by Barack Obama to offer the opening prayer for his inaugural, and that has made all kinds of people hopping mad! On the one side are the gay rights activists and pro-choice activists and their supporters both outside and inside the church, who see Obama's choice as a betrayal of the very constituencies that worked so hard to get him elected. Here's the reaction of a colleague who pastors a UCC church in Oregon:

I am deeply troubled that President-elect Obama has invited Rick Warren to offer the invocation at the inauguration. Warren stands opposed to the progressive agenda and to many of the core values that Barack Obama campaigned on. The symbolism of offering such a prodigious place in history to a figure such as Warren is upsetting ...

And the reaction of one of my college classmates expressed on our email listserv:

I see the choice of Warren as signaling Obama's capitulation to the rhetorical bullying of the Right. Somehow the burden to be tolerant gets shifted so that those of us who self-identify as progressive or liberal must show respect for the views of intolerant moralists ...

On the other side are the extreme social conservatives and leaders of the Religious Right who find fault with Warren for agreeing to do it. One example:

Yesterday, Pastor Rick Warren issued a statement attempting to excuse his act of support for Mr. Obama, an ardent supporter of abortion, by saying, "The Bible admonishes us to pray for our leaders." However, Pastor Warren's participation in Obama's Inauguration is tantamount to placing his stamp of approval on Obama and his policies that stand in direct opposition to Biblical truths. The Bible clearly states in Ephesians 5:11 that as Christians we should have "nothing to do with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them ..."

Basically, both sides are saying the same thing, the left to Obama and the right to Warren: "You're supposed to be on our side! What's going on?"

That's what it's about in our world: taking sides, drawing lines, giving no quarter. And anyone who even thinks about listening carefully to an opponent's point of view or granting some respect to the "other side" is seen as a traitor. In our world, it's about winning, not about reconciling.

Whose side do you suppose God is on? Maybe you remember how Abraham Lincoln answered that question:

My concern is not whether God is on our side; my greatest concern is to be on God's side ...

And God's side is all about reconciling. At least Obama is trying to get us to listen to each other. But God has bigger plans!

God's plan is to bring all creation together -- everything, everyone -- to bring all creation together in Christ ...

Right and left ...

the conservative and the liberal ...

the socialist and the capitalist ...

the oilman and the Greenpeace volunteer ...

the Rush Limbaugh ditto-head and the fan of Keith Olberman ...

the Israeli and the Palestinian ...

the Muslim and the Christian ...

the rich and the poor ...

the strong and the weak ...

the oppressed and the oppressor ...

the betrayer and the betrayed ...

you, and all those who are divided against you, by your choice or by theirs.

God's plan is to bring us, all of us, together.

That's the good news. So why does this good news bring great joy? That may be harder for us to see, harder for us to understand. Because there are certainly some people with whom we would rather not be reconciled! And because we can do without joy. We're satisfied with a little happiness. We're satisfied with living a relatively safe and healthy and unthreatened and unbothered life. We are content to live out our days as they are, and to let the rest of creation worry about itself.

But God has bigger plans! And those plans involve us! It is as we begin to see that bigger plan, a plan that weaves together the destinies of people and of the universe itself in ways we would never have imagined, it is then that the timpani roll of joy begins to rumble throughout our bodies and our souls.

And it is as we join ourselves to that plan, as we make God's business our business, as we who are reconciled seek to be reconcilers, that the timpani roll rises in a grand crescendo in us!

God is bringing all creation together! God is reconciling the world to himself! God is breaking down all the walls that divide us -- the walls that divide us from each other, and the walls that divide all of us from God! God has come to us! God is with us! What great joy!

What great joy!

In Jesus Christ, the man of Nazareth, our crucified and risen Savior, you have come to us and shared our common lot, conquering sin and death, and reconciling the world to yourself ...