

May 22/22 Advent Lutheran Church

“My Last Sermon,”

By David Keesey-Berg

This morning I appear to be abandoning the appointed texts for this day, but I would argue they are hidden in there somewhere. I begin with two brief quotations that have been on my mind these past few days. The first is a quotation Jim Eastman sent around to the GEMS the (Grumpy Elderly Men.) It is a brief passage from J.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings. Frodo is lamenting to Gandolf. “I wish it had not happened in my time! So do I” said Gandolf! And so do all who live in times like these!”

But it is not for them or for us to decide. All we have to decide is what to do with the time we have been given!”

The timing of the events that threaten to upend our lives and shatter our hopes and dreams or open new unheard of possibilities rests in wiser hands than ours. Tuck those words away in your mind and heart and see what insights they germinate!

My real text for today is one sentence which I scribbled in the front of my battered Bible more than 50 years ago. The words are from Psalm 39. The Psalmist lifts up his heart and his future to God and makes this simple statement of faith, “I am thy passing guest!” For me it's all there captured in those few words. “I am” born into this life and my birth is a huge miracle!” I am thine.”, I am here for a purpose larger than myself. I am blessed to be a blessing to others! “I am passing through” Every day is precious because one day my time of earth will be over! “I am thy guest!” In whatever the future brings, I will be bathed in the love and generosity of God! That's all I need to say this morning but since I am an old preacher, of course I will say more!

In 1972 Luther College invited several professors to deliver a lecture entitled, “My Last Lecture.” They were asked to think about what they would say to their students, if they could deliver only one last lecture. Most of them didn't sound much different than what they would have said did in a normal class lecture. Imagine our shock when Robert Jensen, a brilliant scholar and a close personal friend said, “I don't have to imagine, this is my last lecture!”

He went on to explain that he believed that every attempt we make to put into words what we believe about reality or the meaning of our own life, we speak against the backdrop of our own death. So, this morning I welcome you to journey with me as we share my last sermon

Three weeks ago, I was given the assignment of preaching on this Gospel. Over the years, I have come back again and again to these comforting words. Jesus speaks about his departure but at the same time Jesus tells us that this a time of “birthing.” Jesus tells we are being birthed into the new experience of living in the loving presence of the Holy Spirit, bringing the presence of God into every nook and cranny of our lives and in our troubled world.

The central promise of this text is that declaration by Jesus, that God is “with us”, in times of distress and times of great joy,” at the time of birthing and “with us” when we enter into whatever waits for us beyond this life.

While Jesus is emphasizing his “departure,” My mind keeps drifting back to the sheer miracle of Jesus being birthed into our troubled world. The odds of any of us being born are astronomical, given all the things that needs to happen to make this miracle possible.

I regret that I have no real memories of my own birth, to say nothing of those months spent in the nurturing warmth of my mother’s womb. Where I was fed by the perfect food designed to enable me to be formed into a living human being. Fortunately, these past few days, Sonja and my children have dug out large dusty boxes of old pictures. One of them is a picture of my mother gazing down with tender love on a very helpless early version of David Keesey-Berg.

I regret all these many years later, that I never thanked her properly for the gift of her life and her love. She provided the perfect environment for me to begin my journey. Our arrival into this world is a miracle and a mystery! I’ve been thinking a lot these last few days, about Jesus making that same journey with us.

It is, as Rachel Held Evans puts it, “a story almost impossible to believe!” The problem is, she uses the name “God”, instead of “Jesus”.

She writes, “Imagine, God shrinking down to the size of tiny zygote, planted in the soft lining of a women’s womb. God growing fingers and toes. God inching down the birth channel and entering this world, covered in blood, perhaps into the sturdy arms of a midwife. God crying out

in hunger, reaching out for his mother's breast. God totally relaxed, eyes closed, his chubby little arms raised over his head in a gesture of complete trust. God resting in his mother's lap.

I can't get around the fact that I struggle with the name of God being attached to that storyline. I guess it is the picture of God, not just Jesus, being in that place of total vulnerability. God trusting God's very self in bodily form to a very young woman. In that moment God needed to be fed by a woman. Before Jesus could feed us with bread and wine, he needed a woman to say to him, "this is my body, given for you."

As I come to the close of this challenging sermon, my eyes are drawn to the portrait that looms over my desk. It is my father standing in his pulpit clad his gown and stole. He is gazing down at me with a serious, but also, slightly bemused expression on his face, as though he is saying "well David, this time you got yourself in pretty deep didn't you?"

I treasure that picture, because my father played such a huge role in helping me to discover that I was here for a purpose. That God had blessed me so that I could be a blessing for those people who would make this journey with me.

Today, as I hear the clock ticking down, I am reminded that there will be a time in the future when there is no longer any one left to look up at that picture, with my warm, dawning sense of recognition, and no one except Jesus to feel that deep sense of love and gratitude I feel for that dear man.

But our sharing in what is to come is not dependent on our sight or memory. Fredrich Buechner shares a little memory of his children. They being dropped off by the school bus. He writes "I pick them up as they run to our car, not for keeps, but for this moment the world has given them back to me to me again, and whatever the world choses to do later, it cannot lay so much a hand on the "has-beeness" of this moment! The past is inviolate. We are none of us safe, but everything that has happened is safe. In all the reaches of eternity what has happed cannot be undone.

That tells us is that even our death does not change the value or contribution of our life. Nothing we have experienced or contributed to the great story of God's unfolding miracle of creation is diminished by our death. What has happened will always have happened!

We will always be part of that miraculous story which includes our family and friends, and, of course, our enemies, and all our other kinfolk, stately trees and humble mosses, gentle rains, and warmth of suns. All of whom have so much to teach us about how to live with gratitude and compassion on this blessed earth.

As I end this message, I simply want to say again, I am at peace with whatever is coming for me. These past few days since we received the news of the cancer that has invaded my body, Sonja and I have been showered with prayers and support of all kinds. I have been able to share some wonderful time together with family and friends. And Sonja has been the fierce Warrior on my behalf, tirelessly working to provide for my wellbeing! I feel deeply blessed and surrounded by love.

I end this rambling sermon with a few lines of a poem entitled: An Old Preacher's Prayer, as he celebrates the 89<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his birth. I would love to claim it as my own work, because it speaks to where my heart and mind is during these troubled times through which we are passing. but most of it comes from the pen of James Lowery a highly respected preacher from Henderson, North Carolina.

An old Preacher's Prayer on the Eighty-Ninth Anniversary of His Birth.

Holy Son of the one true God. seated as ever at Her right hand in a place beyond place, removed yet listening as my grandfather's clock counts and chimes, numbering my hours and days, gathering speed, one chasing the other, tick tock, tick tock.

Earthy Son of God, standing by me here, present, as though in a sacrament, shoulder to shoulder with me here surrounded by the tokens of my preaching life: certificates, paintings, and books everywhere, and a large box of old sermons, some not half bad, others...well you know, my sin goes ever before me.

It's my eighty-ninth birthday and I've come here to pray as is my custom in this wee sanctuary. I like coming here with just you and me, where you don't seem to be bothered by my cluttered study and the crusting of my brain.

Son of God and friend of sinners, listen to this old preacher praying. The ancient prophet predicted a time would be coming when the Spirit of God would be poured out and on that glad and fearsome day the young would see visions and the old would dream dreams.

Son of God, friend of this sinner, I'm finding it very hard to dream dreams. I see this once proud nation of noble, but also sin soaked birth crumbling beneath the weight of lies and greed while the rich get richer and the poor are forced to grovel. It's hard just now to dream as we once did of a land of milk and honey or of manna freely shared in the wilderness.

On this eighty-ninth anniversary of the day of my birth, give this old codger a new dream or two, or maybe three or four, or maybe even more. Pictures of hope unbounded for my family and my friends new or of long standing, and people of all nations, times and places set free by acts of sacrificial grace.

All this is to pray, Savior and Friend, that your Mom grant this old preaching fool just enough time to see these dear ones on the way to a new world birthing. Now take this long and rambling prayer and lay it at the feet of your Mother's holy feet. Then whisper in her listening ear to tell her where she can find it. So may it be. So may it be! Amen.