The Rev. John Sampson, Pastor
Glen Ridge Congregational Church
Sunday, November 23, 2025
Thanksgiving

Luke 1:68 - 79

Will you pray with me?

God, may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

Today, is the end of the year, the end of the liturgical year. It is like the December 31st of the church year. But instead of being called New Year's Eve, today is called Reign of Christ. What began a year ago in a small, quiet voice, now proclaims the story of God's salvation through the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ as being complete, of having attained sovereignty over the world, and throughout our lives.

Step by step, we've told the story that began out on the edges of the Roman Empire, in a backwater town, to two unknown and apparently insignificant peasants, nobodies, at least in the way that humanity usually values such things.

And to these two people, Mary and Joseph, was born a child, a son, named Jesus, who we believe was uniquely related to God. Now in this congregation we have a plurality of beliefs about who Jesus was and is, and will forever be. For some of us, Jesus is God incarnate. For others, Jesus is a prophet filled with God's Holy Spirit. For others, he is the "sage of Galilee." And for still others, we might not really know what we think about him, other than he is a person of such spiritual depth and insight that we want to have his story influence the story of our lives.

And what a story, and example it has been. Years after he is born and his story goes quiet, Jesus burst onto the scene. He is baptized and a voice coming from heaven announces that Jesus is God's Son, beloved and blessed. Jesus is tempted in the desert, and comes back to start his ministry of preaching and healing, of feeding and reconciling. It is in this ministry that contrary to so much of what lives in our hearts and minds we are to love our enemies, to forgive the unforgivable, to remember those who we have chosen to forget through our apathy and self-centeredness. We are told that the poor, and the peacemakers, and the hungry are the ones who are, in fact, blessed.

We see Jesus hated for enacting love in this world. We see him denounced, and arrested, convicted and executed on a cross. And in three days to all of the ways we, as humans, have said no, to everything that Jesus has stood for, God responds with a cosmic yes, by raising Jesus from the dead. In this act of resurrection God tells us that nothing can stop the commandment to love beyond all bounds.

And after some time, the resurrected Jesus finally says goodbye to his followers, and rejoins God, enthroned in heaven. Jesus is given power and authority over all time and space. Love, and all of the values it informs, is given sovereignty throughout Creation.

As our reading today says, it is through the life of Jesus, that we have been redeemed, and saved. It is through the one we call the Christ that we have been shown mercy, and come before God a new, without fear, being shown the life of righteousness and holiness.

And yet…

I remember in my old church I asked my congregation on the Sunday after Easter if anything had changed. After we had celebrated the resurrection of Jesus, did their lives, or the world seem any different. And in a moment of true honesty, they said no. Nothing had changed in their lives.

At the end of the church year, I think it is worthwhile asking this same question to you. After celebrating the birth and ministry and death and resurrection of Jesus over these past twelve months, has anything changed for you? Has your life been altered by the stories and celebrations related to the Christ that you've been a part of in this church in any way?

I hope that when you look within, or even without, you can answer positively that coming into relationship with Jesus has made a difference for you in obvious and practical ways, and perhaps in some more subtle and quieter ways.

But if you look within your life, and see little or no spiritual transformation over the past year, I wonder if it has something to do with this image of Christ being enthroned in heaven. I wonder if we look back over the year and see that we remain untouched by Christ's life and ministry if the one place that the sovereignty of love has not touched is our hearts.

Because if Christ rules in heaven, but doesn't have any power over the deepest and most profound parts of ourselves, it can feel like the image of Christ being enthroned is nothing but a fiction, and a myth.

Heaven is a place that exists on no star chart that astronomy has ever created. It is an inaccessible place that only God gives access to. Our hearts are similar. There is a muscle in our physiology called the heart, but that isn't the place Jesus talks about. What he's talking about is on no anatomical map that we possess. And only we give access to another to enter that most vulnerable place.

If we look into our hearts, do we see the Christ enthroned there, or have we sealed our most holy of holies against him? Resisting the presence of love and reconciliation into the very place where it could actually touch us, and invite us into a new life? Perhaps we look within and see the Christ in our minds and thoughts, but not in our hearts. Or perhaps we do find him there, but certainly not enthroned.

There's an odd shift in our reading this morning, a change of time. I don't know if you caught it, or not. But the passage opens by telling us that God's salvation has already happened, and that we have been reconciled to the Holy One. But then the hymn shifts from the past to the future. The one who we were told has already come and shown mercy on us, now has yet to be born. Our salvation is now in the future and we are a people sitting in darkness with the light about to break over us.

To all of us who may look within and see that the life and ministry of the Christ has not yet touched us, or perhaps touched us too superficially, today is not the end of the story. It is simply the end of this telling of the story. The story will begin again, and we will have another opportunity to open the gates of our hearts to a baby born at an unexpected time, and in an unexpected place. And we will be given another chance to enthrone the message of love and compassion in our hearts, and in the heart of the world.

Amen.