

Pastor Fritz Wiese “Celebration, Salvation, Activation”
27 December 2009

What if we could order life the way we order gourmet coffee? Recently, I was reading how this might go, as we consider our hopes for 2010, as well as the rest of our lives. (Max Lucado, Fearless, 125) “Give me a tall, extra hot coup of adventure, cut the dangers, with two shots of good health.”

“A decaf brew of longevity, please, with a sprinkle of fertility. Go heavy on the agility and cut the disability.”

“I’ll have a pleasure mocha with extra stirrings of indulgence. Make sure it’s consequence free.”

“I’ll go with a grande happy-latte, with a dollop of love, sprinkled with Caribbean retirement.”

That would be an amazing coffee shop, huh? Starbucks would really be making the bucks!

But life doesn’t always fill our cups just the way we’ve ordered, does it? Last week, I talked to one of my high school friends. Her husband, a surgeon who was losing his eye-sight, in the midst of his depression, took his own life, leaving my friend Betsy with 3 kids and a horrible doubt that maybe love doesn’t conquer all. The same day, Epiphany’s own Shawn Hendrickson calls me from Children’s Hospital where his eldest son Chris is battling a viral infection. This is Shawn’s 2nd son in two years to spend time at Children’s. Underemployment, worry at work, hassles with health—too many times we never would order what the waitress brings out on our plate of life.

Today, our gospel lesson tells us that Mary and Joseph fit right into this category of “cup runneth over,” but what’s running over is stress and surprise. You know what they’ve faced so far. Reputation-rattling assignments from God, a pregnancy that created more Bethlehem buzz than Tiger Woods’ off-course capers, unexpected calls from sheep herders and star gazers, and an emergency refugee road-trip to Egypt and back.

Today, the gospel of Luke has fast-forwarded the story about 12 years. (People always tell parents that, don’t they? When their kids are young, folks will say, “Just wait, in the blink of an eye, this babe of yours will soon be a teenager.” And that’s the way it’s worked with Luke. Two days ago, Jesus was born. Today he is 12 years old! ☺)

And guess what? This almost teen-age Jesus is lost! Nowhere to be found. Joseph and family have traveled down to Jerusalem with the festival, and on the return home with the large band from Nazareth, the

parents realize that Jesus isn't walking with his band of friends as he usually does. They call his cell phone, but of course, no answer. They check with all the other co-travelers and nobody has seen him. So worried out of their minds now, Mary and Joseph turn the donkey around and head back to Jerusalem in search of their child. 3 days they have to search! (Mary lets him have it—"why have you treated us this way, child?! And then Jesus answers back almost sounding like a teenager, almost blaming the parents—"why did you wonder where I was." I know there's a theological point about Jesus' identity, but wow.) The Starbucks Star of Bethlehem didn't forecast a cup of crisis like this, did it?

But before we dig into Jesus' teenage disappearance any further, can we take a time-out? Before we analyze the 12 year old Jesus on the move, I want to hold on for just a moment to the Jesus in the manger. Before tackling this cup of crisis management, I want to revel in the fact that Christmas is a call to celebration. Can you say that word with me: CELEBRATION!

This is the message from the angel in Luke: "I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people."

Now as Christians, we are clear about the nature of this celebration. It's awesome that Christmas means vacation days, off from school and or work, but we don't celebrate because of that. It's terrific that we exchange gifts in honor of Christmas, and we're charged up with our new GPS, computers, and gizmos; but we don't celebrate because of that. Parties with friends, Christmas cookies, caroling, radio-station-coordinated light displays. There are so many awesome things about this time of year. But there is only ONE reason for our celebration. One reason. Jesus.

To illustrate this point, I'm thrilled to have Emily Kinnebeck/Samantha Donmeyer to sing a wonderful song, Glitz and Tinsel, from this children's Christmas musical two weekends ago. We've printed the lyrics in the bulletin to this carol of clarification of the one reason we celebrate.

Emily/Samantha take it away.

They've strung the lights, they've hung a wreath. They've got angels, snowmen, reindeer and tree. It's kind of empty, cause without Jesus, you'll never understand, you'll never know the heart of Christmas. It's like a present with no gift inside, it's like a Christmas card no one cared to sign. I'm sure I've done it. I've polished up the surface and not what's deep inside. Lord this is my Christmas prayer: Fill me with love for people everywhere. In all I say, in all I do, when they look at me I want them to see you.

I can't get enough of that song, and Emily/Samantha, I hope you remember those lyrics for the rest of your lives. For without each of us unwrapping the gift Jesus, without each of us engaging Jesus as we engage the new game or computer, our seasonal celebration is temporary, it's fake, it's destined to disappoint. Because Jesus brings what no other celebration

does: salvation. For in Jesus, Light comes to our darkness. Hope enters our despair. Life into death. Eternity to finitude. Here's how the angel put it to the shepherds. "I announce good news of great joy to you and all people because tonight is born to you a SAVIOR." The celebration rings true because it brings SALVATION."

When one agonizes with a cut or wound, the doctor applies a "salve" to the problem, a medicine designed to bring healing back to the way we were meant to be. The way we were meant to be. That's the life we want, isn't it?

Our theology of salvation conveys that certainly, first, we are saved FROM something. Romans 3.23 says "for everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard" and Isaiah 59.2 "Your sins are a roadblock between you and your God." Or as the Message version of Rom 7.24 shares, "I've tried everything, and nothing helps. I'm at the end of my rope. Is there no one who can do anything for me? The answer, thank God, is that Jesus Christ can and does."

But Christian celebration holds that Jesus' salvation is not only from something, (sin) but TO something (an adventurous life the way God intended).

Last week I heard about Olie and Lena. It seems that Olie passed away, so Lena made her way down the big city of Minneapolis to put an obituary in the paper. She submitted two words: "Olie died." The publisher responded: "But Lena, Olie was well loved. I'm sure people want to know a bit more about his life. And if money is a concern, please know the first 5 words in the obit are free, and the rest aren't overly expensive." So Lena took a minute to think. 5 words, huh? "OK. Please write: Olie died. Boat for sale."

When our lives are over, and people are summarizing our earthly stay, we want their thoughts to transcend our fascination with earthly possessions, right? The boat, the career, the golf handicap. Jesus saves us not only from sin, but for the purpose of making a difference. As one insightful theologian writes, Salvation is not about *survival*, it's not even about *success* at a job, it's about *significance* in the relationships and opportunities God has given us. Here's how Paul puts it Ephesians 1: "It's in Christ that we find out who we are and what we are living for. Long before we first heard of Christ and got our hopes up, he had his eye on us, had designs on us for glorious living, part of the overall purpose he is working out in everything and everyone."

This is the 3rd opportunity of Christmas: 1. celebration 2. salvation. 3. Activation. Friends, we're called to activate the significance, the opportunities, the identities Jesus has saved us for. I've got a little clip here that illustrates such an activation opportunity.

Run Advent Conspiracy 2009 clip.

Thanks to all of you at Epiphany who gave so generously before Christmas to the Adopt a Family program. You went out and bought presents for people you didn't even know. But I bet today that many of us have a present or two at home that we didn't necessarily want. What if, after Christmas, we could take one of those presents and instead of exchanging it for something else, used that resource to go to a place like elca/goodgifts. You can go to a website like this one, and for \$20 buy 2 mosquito nets that will prevent children from contracting malaria, or dental and medical care for a child at an orphanage, or 20 chicks for a family to have fresh eggs themselves and earn money by selling the rest, and the list goes on.

May the Holy Spirit lead you in ACTIVATION of your SALVATION, as you give, forgive, spend time, encourage and follow the One who means true celebration.

Well, let's close by hopping back to our gospel story. Mary and Joseph realize Jesus isn't where they expect him to be. And what a GIFT that proves to be. We expect God to reign in heaven, far away from us. But there God is, in the manger, and eventually hanging out with the fishermen and everyday folks. We expect Jesus to be in the sphere of judgment; but he hungers to move with us to mercy. Friends, maybe we can be followers of Jesus in the sense we too can be in those places that are *un-expected* of us. When we find ourselves drinking from cups we haven't ordered, and the world expects us to be bitter, let's demonstrate that we live in hope. In financial uncertainty, when the world expects us to show prudent retraction, let's show generosity. When others expect us to treat each other simply by what's fair and what they deserve, let's follow Jesus by living in the land of surprising grace. Let us be a part of the Christmas strategy that Jesus desires to be born in our world. Celebration. Salvation. Activation. In the name of the gift, Amen.