

Reconciled: 2. Reconciled with God
Matthew 1:1-4; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19
December 6, 2020
Pastor Steve Richards

In last Monday's Star Tribune, sportswriter Howard Sinker began his report of last Sunday's MN Vikings football game with these words: *By next weekend, you can be reasonably sure that Chad Beebe's performance during the final minutes of Sunday's 28-27 Vikings victory over Carolina will be the stuff of sermons for sports-minded clergy.* I took the bait, and so that's where I want to begin. Are there any Vikings fans left this season? It took barely two minutes for Vikings' wide receiver Chad Beebe to go from zero to hero. First he fumbled a fair-catch reception, the sort of catch you and I should have been able to make. And when he fumbled it, I immediately thought, "That's the last time we will see Beebe in a Vikings uniform." I think everybody who was watching was certain that his fumble would mean the Vikings lost the game and with it any chance of reaching the playoffs. But in a series of plays you would have to see to believe, the unexpected happened. And isn't that the Christmas story? Let's watch these two plays from last Sunday's game: [video]

Suddenly, all is restored. All is well. That moment: when hearts turn from hostility to humility, when emotions turn from irritation to affection. That moment is a spiritual force created by God that we call reconciliation. Reconciliation is when barriers are torn down, when divisions are healed, when hostility and woundedness is replaced with the peace, the *shalom* of God (peace, harmony, wholeness). The Old Testament prophets recognized the world was thirsting for this. When the Messiah comes, they said, he will bring reconciliation. The prophet Isaiah provided this picture: **The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them.** That's Christmas. What would it be like for North Korea and South Korea to live in peace? What would it be like for Iran and Israel to live in peace? What would it be like for the reddest Republican and bluest Democrat to live in peace? Or what would it be like if 200 years of slavery and 100 years of Jim Crow laws and the racial injustice of the 21st century were suddenly healed? Or a friendship restored or a marriage healed? Divisions hurt us. They hurt friendships, marriages, workplaces, nations. Even the Christian Church can become fractured and result in hostility toward each other. The crying need for our world is reconciliation – and that's at the heart of the Christmas story. The apostle Paul put it this way: **God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ**

For the next three weeks, we want to focus on reconciliation – with God, with each other, and then the rest of the world. The best part of the holiday season is relationships, and the hardest part of the holiday season is relationships. And depending on your perspective that makes COVID19 either a blessing or a curse for your holiday season. Reconciliation is all about relationships. The Gospel of Matthew introduces us to the story of Christmas by first listing the ancestors of Jesus: **A record of the ancestors of Jesus Christ, son of David, son of Abraham: Abraham was the father of Isaac. Isaac was the father of Jacob. Jacob was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah, whose mother was Tamar.** Why is Tamar included here? If you don't know Tamar, hers is a Christmas story – found in Genesis 38.

A man named Judah goes to Adullam and marries a Canaanite woman named Shua. In that day it was unheard of to marry a Canaanite. Canaanites were pagans and to marry Shua meant choosing idolatry and unfaithfulness to God. Judah and Shua have three sons – Er, Onan,

Shelah. According to custom, Judah finds a wife for Er named Tamar, but we are told that Er does something immoral in the sight of God and dies. In the ancient world when a woman's husband died, her father-in-law would have her marry the next oldest son who in this case is Onan. This was a polygamist culture. By marrying Onan, Onan would be fulfilling the responsibility of his older brother so that her first born would receive the family inheritance, and Onan and any descendants from his other wives would not. So Onan finds a way so that he will not impregnate Tamar (I've censored this part of the story which you can read for yourself), but God is displeased with what Onan has done, and Onan dies. All Tamar wants is to bring children into the world and even though she is a pagan, she wants to be part of the story of God's people. But now she's had two husbands, both have died and still no children. Her father-in-law's responsibility is clear. She must marry Shelah, but he is not older enough to marry. Judah sends Tamara back to her family home until Shelah is old enough to marry.

Do you see what Judah is facing? He's already lost two sons. Does he really want Tamar marrying his third and final son? What if he also dies? So Judah forgets about Tamar. The years pass and one day Tamar learns that Judah will be traveling past her home, so she disguises herself and waits for Judah to pass. When he does, he assumes she is a prostitute and takes advantage of her. Tamar ends up pregnant. If you think your family is messed up, they may not seem so bad after hearing this story. Judah will be Tamar's father-in-law and the father of Tamar's child. But when Judah learns Tamar is pregnant, he doesn't yet know that he is the father but as the father-in-law, he must decide what to do. And Judah says, "Bring her out so that she may be burned." He plans to kill her, but just before she is thrown on the fire, Tamar reveals to Judah that he is the father.

Remember Judah? He was the brother who sold his youngest brother into slavery and took Joseph's coat of many colors, covered it with goat's blood, and brought it to his father to prove Joseph was dead. Now, Judah is forced to recognize his sin, his past behavior has caught up to him, his broken promise, his own deception – not only to Tamar but to his own father decades earlier. And Judah says, **She is more righteous than I am.** This admission is huge! Tamar lives and gives birth to twins, and she becomes part of the story that brings us to Christmas.

Even if you've heard this story, I doubt that you've considered this to be a Christmas story. The ancient world was a brutal place – not unlike our world today. At last month's Gala for Imara International, we learned that all the schools in Kenya closed when COVID was detected. All children were sent home and as a result it is estimated there have been 30,000 teen-aged pregnancies – sexual assaults/rapes. Which reinforces the need for a ministry like Imara that welcomes young women who have been abused. This is a brutal world. The lineage of Jesus is filled with real world stories, and yet out of this lineage, the gospel of Matthew does not skip over Tamar, but singles her out as the great-great-great-great grandmother of Jesus. Tamar is marginalized because of her gender, her ethnicity, her status as childless, twice widowed, a victim of sexual assault, and yet she shows courage and determination and ultimately triumphs over an unjust system to become part of the Christmas story.

God is watching over Tamar. God wants to be with people whom the world rejects as unworthy. God is even working in the life of Judah as we will learn in next week's message. Tamar is somebody. She is worthy of being remembered, worthy of God's redemptive, reconciling love. And as the gospel of Matthew points out, her story is intertwined with the birth of Jesus. Jesus is part Canaanite! Do you see what God was doing? Everybody is welcome here. **God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them.** Jesus comes and there are no outsiders. No one is beyond God's reach. Tamar is one through whom God's love flows. This is the Christmas story. Jesus came for everyone. God

wants to be with you – and if there is anything in your life, if there is anything in your past that has separated you from God and made you to feel unworthy, know this: God sent his son for you and wants to repair and restore and reconcile your relationship. So, this Christmas, know that someone like Tamar is welcomed right there next to the manager, right there next to the Christ child, right there listening to angels: *Hark! The herald angels sing, “Glory to the newborn king. Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled.”*

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of December 6, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Dear God, thank you for your faithfulness through the ages. We want to be open to your Spirit so that you may accomplish what you want to do in us today. We pray that in this season, others will see your presence in us and be drawn closer to you. Amen.

Monday, December 7

Scripture: Luke 2:21-24

When eight days had passed, Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived. When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.

Observation: Like all pious Jews, Jesus' earthly parents carefully carried out the provisions of the Law of Moses. Specifically, after eight days (as called for in Leviticus 12), they circumcised Jesus (which, like baptism today, was a sign that he belonged to God). Thirty-two days later, in Jerusalem, they offered a sacrifice that the law allowed the poor to present (*If the mother cannot afford a sheep, she can bring two turtledoves or two pigeons—one for the entirely burned offering and the other for the purification offering. The priest will then make reconciliation for her, and she will be clean.* Lev. 12:8). Note that after childbirth, they believed the mother needed cleansing in order for her relationship with God to be restored.

Application: One touching part of Leviticus 12 was that it gave an option for those who couldn't afford a lamb to sacrifice, showing God's love for the poor as well as the rich. How is God's love helping you live in a place of "abundance," whatever the state of your finances? What rituals give you a sense of God's presence in your life?

Prayer: Lord God, through the scripture, you make clear that you value all people, not because of what we have or what we can give, but simply because we are. Thank you for the way you have made yourself known in my life. I live today grateful to be within your love and care. Amen.

Tuesday, December 8

Scripture: Psalm 92:12-15; Proverbs 16:31-32

The righteous will spring up like a palm tree. They will grow strong like a cedar of Lebanon. Those who have been replanted in the LORD's house will spring up in the courtyards of our God. They will bear fruit even when old and gray; they will remain lush and fresh in order to proclaim: "The LORD is righteous. He's my rock. There's nothing unrighteous in him."

Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is found on the path of righteousness. Better to be patient than a warrior, and better to have self-control than to capture a city.

Observation: In Biblical times, people who lived long lives for God were greatly valued. Grey hair was called “a crown of glory” and a sign of much wisdom. These mature adults had learned, among other lessons, the value of patience and self-control for living life wisely. God often called these wise ones (including Simeon and Anna) to action.

Application: In our society, older adults (who have given much of their lives to serve God and others) are not always valued. If you are older, how can you offer wisdom and help to others, humbly sharing important lessons you’ve learned on your journey? If you’re younger, how can you show openness to learn from those who are older?

Prayer: Today, I remember those people who have helped to point me toward you. I give thanks for their witness and how they have loved and served you. Help me to live in such a way that others will see you through my words and actions, in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Wednesday, December 9

Scripture: Luke 2:25-27

A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn’t die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus’ parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law.

Observation: Simeon was led by the Spirit to the Temple area. The text implies that the Spirit also must have led him to Mary, Joseph and their infant son rather than to any of the other parents who brought infants to the Temple that day. For Simeon, this was an answer to a life-long prayer. Luke said God had promised Simeon that he would see God’s anointed one, the Messiah.

Application: Verse 27: “Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area.” He was tuned in and listening for the nudging that God sends us through the Spirit. In what ways have you sensed the Holy Spirit’s leading in your life? How can you distinguish between the Spirit’s “nudges” and other impulses that may come to you?

Prayer: Speak, Lord, your servant is listening. Help me to be patient and deliberate in my listening for your direction, and then ready to respond. Amen.

Thursday, December 10

Scripture: Luke 2:28-35

Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, “Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It’s a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.” His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.”

Observation: If Mary was like most young mothers, she must have felt a little uneasy as this elderly man, probably a stranger, took her baby in his arms. Simeon amazed her by saying

Jesus was a savior for all peoples – that meant even the Gentiles (*You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel.*). And he warned her that her “blessed” lot would not always be easy: “a sword will pierce your innermost being too” (verse 35).

Application: “God’s salvation” was here—but Simeon’s joy (guided by the Spirit) was not naïve. He knew many people and forces would resist God’s kingdom, and he warned Mary that that would cause her pain. What helps you trust God and live out God’s purposes when it’s not easy or popular? Has following God brought you any kind of pain?

Prayer: Eternal God, your love never fails. When all else seems uncertain, you are still God. In the midst of life’s stress, I cling to your faithfulness, knowing that you will never let me go. Keep the promise of Christmas alive in me. Amen.

Friday, December 11

Scripture: Isaiah 49:5-13

And now the LORD has decided—the one who formed me from the womb as his servant—to restore Jacob to God, so that Israel might return to him. Moreover, I’m honored in the LORD’s eyes; my God has become my strength. He said: It is not enough, since you are my servant, to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to bring back the survivors of Israel. Hence, I will also appoint you as light to the nations so that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth. The LORD, redeemer of Israel and its holy one, says to one despised, rejected by nations, to the slave of rulers: Kings will see and stand up; commanders will bow down on account of the LORD, who is faithful, the holy one of Israel, who has chosen you. The LORD said: At the right time, I answered you; on a day of salvation, I helped you. I have guarded you, and given you as a covenant to the people, to restore the land, and to reassign deserted properties, saying to the prisoners, “Come out,” and to those in darkness, “Show yourselves. Along the roads animals will graze; their pasture will be on every treeless hilltop. They won’t hunger or thirst; the burning heat and sun won’t strike them, because one who has compassion for them will lead them and will guide them by springs of water. I will turn all my mountains into roads; my highways will be built up. Look! These will come from far away. Look! These from the north and west, and these from the southland. Sing, heavens! Rejoice, earth! Break out, mountains, with a song. The LORD has comforted his people, and taken pity on those who suffer.

Observation: Like most of the songs of praise at Jesus’ birth, Simeon’s words in Luke 2:28-35 had their roots deep in the Hebrew Scriptures. In today’s reading, the prophet Isaiah said God’s servant would restore not only Israel (which was in exile), but all the nations, to a proper relationship with God. The New Testament church always saw Jesus’ saving work in those words.

Application: In verse 13, Isaiah wrote, “The LORD has comforted his people, and taken pity on those who suffer.” The first readers of Isaiah thought of God’s power bringing Israel home from exile in Babylon. For Simeon, the verse said God had comforted and taken pity by sending Jesus as the Savior. In what ways does God calm and comfort you when you need it?

Prayer: Holy One, as you brought hope and comfort to people at the time of Isaiah and Simeon, may this same gift enter the lives of those in need this Christmas. Let my life be a proclamation of what you continue to offer today. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Saturday, December 12

Scripture: Isaiah 25:6-9; 2 Corinthians 5:14-6:2

On this mountain, the LORD of heavenly forces will prepare for all peoples a rich feast, a feast of choice wines, of select foods rich in flavor, of choice wines well refined. He will swallow up on this mountain the veil that is veiling all peoples, the shroud enshrouding all nations. He will swallow up death forever. The LORD God will wipe tears from every face; he will remove his people's disgrace from off the whole earth, for the LORD has spoken. They will say on that day, "Look! This is our God, for whom we have waited—and he has saved us! This is the LORD, for whom we have waited; let's be glad and rejoice in his salvation!"

The love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: one died for the sake of all; therefore, all died. He died for the sake of all so that those who are alive should live not for themselves but for the one who died for them and was raised. So then, from this point on we won't recognize people by human standards. Even though we used to know Christ by human standards, that isn't how we know him now. So then, if anyone is in Christ, that person is part of the new creation. The old things have gone away, and look, new things have arrived! All of these new things are from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and who gave us the ministry of reconciliation. In other words, God was reconciling the world to himself through Christ, by not counting people's sins against them. He has trusted us with this message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors who represent Christ. God is negotiating with you through us. We beg you as Christ's representatives, "Be reconciled to God!" God caused the one who didn't know sin to be sin for our sake so that through him we could become the righteousness of God.

Since we work together with him, we are also begging you not to receive the grace of God in vain. He says, *I listened to you at the right time, and I helped you on the day of salvation.* Look, now is the right time! Look, now is the day of salvation!

Observation: Jesus saved us, past tense, through his life, death and resurrection. Jesus also saves us, present tense, as we yield ourselves to him each day and join in his mission. And the glorious future hope that God's people have always held is that Jesus will save us when God fully establishes the divine reign, and tears and brokenness are no more.

Application: Review your own spiritual autobiography. In what ways did you find Jesus' gift of salvation in the past? (If by any chance your answer is, "Not yet," remember that "Now is the day of salvation.") In what ways are you living into the gift of reconciliation? (If by any chance you say, "Not much," remember that "Now is the day of salvation.") Remember: Jesus came to be your savior. Be sure you've responded to the apostle's plea: "Be reconciled to God!"

Prayer: O God, what mystery and what love there is in the message that you were in Christ reconciling the world to yourself. Help me set aside any remaining fear, reservation or rebellion, and trust myself fully to your salvation. Amen.