

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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So I sat down to do my sermon prep and was super pumped. "I'm going to preach this on New Year's Day! Starting off the new year doing church-y stuff, how neat! Don't really know what the readings are, but Name of Jesus sounds cool." And even though it was still 2022 at that time, I was really carrying a lot of "new year, new me" energy. This year I'm going to get in the habit of managing my time wisely, so I'm *not* going to procrastinate till the very last minute! Let's leave those past habits behind, and try something new! I am ready to be dazzled! Show me what you've got lectionary!!!

...and then I read the gospel reading and....(sigh)...obviously there's nothing *wrong* with this reading and like God being made flesh and his arrival on this world being made known to poor shepherds who had little to no social or political influence who then go on to testify what they have seen to anyone who will listen is important and shows us all sorts of things about God's nature and stuff but...we did this story last week. You know like...on Christmas and I wanted to start the year off talking about something...*new*. Whatever, I'll preach on the Epistle reading (the second reading)...oh that's...see there's a passage in Galatians and one in Romans where Paul is basically making the exact same point just to two different audiences and I preached the Romans not that long ago so that's also not new. Fine! Hebrew Bible (the first reading) it is! Ah! The priestly blessing! Something that is frequently used as the benediction at the end of service, I bet a lot of people in the

congregation even have it quasi memorized. Not exactly shiny and new...and no psalm today either.

Did I then stop and reflect on like maybe the lectionary is trying to make some kind of point in starting the year off with these specific readings? No of course not. I groaned and went upstairs to tend to all the poinsettias. And on Christmas all of them looked super great and the whole space was beautiful...but on Thursday they were looking rough. Turns out, poinsettias, a plant native to Mexico, don't particularly like frigid cold temperatures. And this made me even *more* grumpy about today's readings. On Christmas Eve, Pastor Jason preached a lovely sermon and used the poinsettias as a sermon illustration. It was great—here's a plug that all our sermons are available to watch on our website so if you were out of town you can check it out.—Anyway they were all pretty and alive when he was talking about them and now they're all wilting and full of dead leaves and a few of them are just entirely dead. And it felt like they were mocking me.

See because I want the new year to be full of shiny and new things. And instead it's starting with a gospel reading that pastor already preached on 8 days ago and somewhat wilting flowers and...this all just feels like leftovers. Doesn't the Name of Jesus deserve more like...pomp? Something other than hand-me-downs surely. And yes the sign for the shepherds was a baby wrapped in rags and lying in a manger. But I'm still clearly not getting the heavy handed metaphor that is trying to be communicated to me. Where's the new stuff!?

So I spent 3-4 hours in here, watering all the poinsettias and picking shriveled leaves off them, trimming dead stems, perpetually sweeping leaves and petals off the floor. And while I'm doing that, I'm flipping through bible commentaries on my

phone, trying to figure out what I'm going to say on Sunday. And I've got *no* ideas, so I'm looking at stuff for all three of them trying to find some nugget of information that I can take and shape into a whole sermon. And a lot of what I read was great but...I kind of felt like it had been said already and I wanted to be dazzled, and Oh God, half this plant is dead, I guess if I turn it it won't be so noticeable? Hmm that is a good point, many of the people Paul is writing to in the Galatian church *were* slaves, I wonder what it would feel like, as a slave living in Galatia being a part of a household but never able to inherit anything, to hear that, even though you are a Gentile, and historically have not been part of the covenant, you have been *adopted*. You can call on God as your Abba (generally a word used by young children, think Daddy rather than Father), just as confidently as any other of God's children can. What a neat metaphor for Paul to use in that specific context. Too bad people twisted this passage to claim that slavery was divinely ordained (it wasn't).

And at some point Annette stuck her head in here and winced a bit at state of the poinsettias and said she was going to crank the heat up a bit and see if that helped. What a concept! Heat for the tropic plants! I feel silly for not thinking about that. ...Luke *does* kind of skip over the process of the shepherds looking for the baby. I guess I never thought about that before either. Were they just busting into every stable in Bethlehem trying to find him? Ohhh if anyone saw them doing that, they'd 100% assume they were trying to steal livestock in the dead of night. And "angels visited us and told us we'd find the Messiah in a manger, we just wanted to see if he was in here" sounds like a *terrible* cover story. Maybe if I'm in a good mood I decide the shepherds overindulged and? ...That is a Monty Python sketch, not a sermon.

And every so often I'd pick up one of the plants and it was still absolutely flourishing, nothing to clear off, just give me some water and I'm good. And every so often I'd read something in one of the commentaries and go "wait a second! When we say that reading from Numbers as a blessing at the end of service, we stop at "the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace, but there's a whole sentence after that? --So they shall put my name on the Israelites, and I will bless them—Oh so like God's promising at the end that these words will result in God blessing them, that's nice. Wait, but God's putting God's name on the *people*? In the Hebrew Bible normally God's name gets put on specific places where God is worshiped like The Temple or the tabernacle or...The Temple a bunch more. Awww so God's giving them a little blessing that will elevate the people to like being a place where God dwells? That's so sweet. Also yeah ok checks out why we're reading this on Name of Jesus. Kind of neat flip-a-roo if you think about it, first God's bestowing his name on the Israelites and then a few thousand years later, one of their decedents will bestow a name on God...I mean I *guess* this verse is kind of new to me but more like because I wasn't paying attention, so I'm not sure that counts. Maybe if I put the flourishing plant next to the half dead one, they will both look $\frac{3}{4}$ alive!

Oh! One of them was forgotten on the floor in corner! It didn't even get to hang out on Christmas! Time out! "The Lord bless you and keep you"—keep means to guard/protect?! *Gasp* I always assumed they meant keep like "retain" or maybe "tend" or something! ...why are they still translating it that way, no one uses keep as a protection word anymore, that's so unintuitive! Oh and the "peace" that it concludes with it is the Hebrew word shalom! —which yes is peace but also harmony and prosperity and wholeness and safety and well-being and completeness. (This

all-encompassing sort of peace is the kind we're sharing when we "pass the peace" later in worship). And God is just wrapping them in this blanket of love and protection and joy and---and the you's are singular. The priests are going to go out to the people and they aren't bestowing one single mass blessing on the people. Rather they are blessing each and every person individually and simultaneously. The Lord bless *you*, specifically.

This was around the time in my sermon writing that I realized I had no idea what the poinsettias would actually look like this morning and that this clever metaphor structure thingy might blow up in my face. (*Comment on plants*) On Thursday though I pinky promise that when I finished they looked close to Christmas level of thriving. Almost like each of them just needed their own little individual blessing and keeping.

Because that relationship that God formed with the Israelites, that's the same one that Paul explains, we Gentiles have received through adoption. All because God sent his son down to hang out with us. And that little baby in the manger grew up and lived a life that embodied really all aspects of that ancient blessing, encouraging everyone that they too could address God by an intimate name like Abba (or Daddy, or Mama, or Dad or...I could go on and on).

So at the end of the day, I didn't actually get to play with anything new and shiny for the new year. Just old flowers and old verses. But even though I'd seen them many times before, I realized there were all sorts of little aspects in them that I'd missed. Perhaps there's a lot of things in our own lives like that too. We're so familiar with our relationships or hobbies or opinions or careers or family structures

or neighborhoods or whatever that we stop really looking at them, too busy trying to find newer and shinier things to dazzle us. My hope for each of you in the new year is that you get the opportunity to slow down and reflect and marvel at some old thing that you “already know” all about too.

And whether you get that moment or not:

May the Lord Bless *you* (specifically) and keep *you* (specifically)

The Lord make his face to shine upon *you* and be gracious to *you*;

The Lord lift up his countenance upon *you* and give *you* peace. Amen.