

Sunday, December 1, 2013

**O, the mystery of God's dwelling**

Advent 1 . . . in our present! – Open House!

Texts: Isaiah 2:1-5; Psalm 122; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44

Over the years Lynne and I have hosted an Open House. It was a way of saying thank you to the congregation we were serving.

We took a couple of weeks to prepare – baking, getting things ready, for up to 100+ people to drop in on us on a Sunday afternoon.

It was a time for fellowshiping with one another over coffee and sweets

- a time of enjoying one another on a Sunday afternoon
- and since we did this near year end
- a time to enjoy the warmth with one another during Christmas time.

We have once hosted an Open House for NSMC

- however we celebrate a community wide Open House every year on Christmas Eve, where we gather in someone's home, singing carols, and enjoying great fellowship and food
- I invite you now to make plans to participate this year – at Munley's

When we were serving in Edmonton, one Open House during the Christmas season, Lynne made some rum balls, in which the rum was not baked out – because they were not baked.

I noticed a couple of older ladies from our church just enjoying the rum flavoring and trying to figure out the little extra kick that they had. They had few inhibitions that afternoon.

We not only invited people from our congregation, but at times we invited neighbors as well, as a way of introducing our neighbors to our church and our church to our neighbors.

When I read these Scriptures of our first Sunday of Advent, I am also hearing that something is happening near the end of the year – near the end of God completing what God has set out to do in human history.

Romans 13: “The hour has already come . . . because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed.”

Matthew 24: “But about that day or hour no one knows. Therefore, keep watch, because you do not know on what day your Lord will come.”

Growing up, these end-time passages were always read in a context of judgment  
– world coming to end.

And indeed these are words of judgment, but not necessarily the kind of judgment that precedes destruction.

I cannot help but think that such warnings are not warnings of destruction, **but invitations to salvation**  
– expressing God's desire for people to be drawn to God.

Listen to the invitation of Isaiah 2: 2 – “In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as the highest of the mountains; it will be exalted above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, ‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord.’”

I believe God is letting us know that time is short, the year/time is coming to an end, God's purposes are being fulfilled, so God is saying:

“Let's have an Open House. Send out the invitations – everyone comes – you, your neighbors, come gather together in the presence of the Living God.”

And rather than “rum balls” being the offering, what people will feast on is “peace.”

“God will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths. The law will go forth from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war no more.”

Paul says it a little more differently – after enumerating the behaviors that do not bring peace, he encourages saying, “Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature.”

The implication being that we are called to gratify the desires of God – to bring peace, to bring wholeness – healing/health/shalom.

Because the kind of Open House we are to be is a place of peace – as Psalm 122 expresses:

“May those who love you be secure. May there be peace within your walls and security within your citadels. For the sake of my friends and of all the people, I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’”  
Today in light of the Israeli – Palestinian conflict, this peace, in the Holy Land, seems to be all the more elusive.

I was listening to NPR on Tuesday and Max Blumenthal was a guest, who recently wrote: *Goliath: Life and Loathing in Greater Israel*. (polarizing acceptance: 50% give it 5 stars on Amazon, and 50% give it 1 star)

In it he argues that Israel's statehood policies, requiring a ratio between Israelis and Palestinians to be 70:30 – as providing the basis for power politics in which Palestinians need to be removed from Israeli territory – in order to maintain the ratio.

He also relates that Israel is one of the most militarized nations in the world – every 18 year old is conscripted for military service.

Peace in Israel; peace between Israel and Palestinians seems like an impossibility, a never to be imagined reality.

**So, what does it mean for us to be a place of peace, if peace is to begin with us as God's people?**

And how then, can we be an Open House that offers a feast of peace?

1. **First we recognize that this is not our house – it is the Lord who dwells among us and we are his people.** This is Christ's house, God's house. Jesus in taking on our humanity set up his house among us – and he has come to walk among us.

It is not about our taking control of the house – be it a state or a church; its God's house – we are invited to live in it.

2. **And this being Christ's house, Christ is the one who invites.** We have heard the invitation and entered it.

Yet, Christ is still inviting. In the parable of the Great Open House (Banquet,) Jesus reveals that all are invited – “Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in (invite) the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” (Luke 14: 21).

3. **And who does Christ invite – apparently anyone Christ wants to invite** – all whom God notices, all whom God wants us to notice – those who are called our neighbors (Parable of the Good Samaritan), but also those who are our enemies (Love your enemies and bless those who persecute you).
4. And so, if Christ invites whomever Christ chooses to invite, then whoever comes to worship with us, comes into this Open House Christ has made us to be, **we are to welcome them as Christ welcomes them.**
5. **And what do we offer?** Maybe a great potluck, a few rumballs, but more so than that.

The meal that we share is Peace.

Restored relationship with God, restored relationship with family, former friends, present enemies.

No longer relying upon swords, spears, knives, guns to make things “right,” but for peace to reign in their hearts and lives as they yield themselves to Christ Jesus who is “before all things and holds all things together.”

6. And just as Christ did not wait around, but rather went out among the people, **so too are we.**

As we dine on the feast of Peace that Christ offers us by dwelling among us, we offer this meal of Peace to whomever Christ has invited in, **but also, we take this meal of Peace outside our walls**

- we take peace to First Baptist Church on Wednesday nights through Dale and Kay, the Pauls, Shelly and Kenton, Linda and others;
- we take Peace to PADS at Libertyville UMC – Dale, Kenton, Phil, David and Glen;
- we take Peace to the gardeners of Mano a Mano through Larry;
- we take Peace to those in need in Lake County – through Mark and his involvement with Love INC, through our providing access to food and produce by our participating with COOL Food Pantry and the Avon Township Food Pantry, Manna Garden Project;
- we bring Peace, God's Peace to everyone to whom the Spirit leads us - - to make connections, sharing the living presence of Jesus Christ.
- Be it at work, at school, in our neighborhoods, where we shop, where we play
- in all we do and
- whomever we meet in our day to day lives.

We are these bringers of Peace so that Peace, God's Shalom may reign here on earth

- in the lives of every human being; all peoples; (and in the lives of political leaders, in the countries they lead – sending out Peace Christmas cards this coming Saturday at Hanging of Greens at MMO),

## **And for what purpose?**

For the reason that all may experience the fullness of God's desire for all humanity (which I believe is the dream of all humanity)

The dream of – “nations will beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks [and their guns into tools which give life and build rather than destroy].

With the result being **not** two old ladies enjoying rumballs, but people all over the world **imbibing Peace** - “Nations will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”

**And it all begins with houses like ours, lives like ours – with you and with me!**

**May we share the gift of peace this season and in all who we are and through all that we do – now and throughout the year!**