Fellowship of Hope Mennonite Church
Advent 2, Year C
December 6, 2009
The King is coming

Friday on my way home I was thinking about this sermon. Nicole and I had been in conversation about worship—the Texts and images and themes and ideas—but there was still something missing in the sermon. So on the way back to Goshen I began thinking about the question, What is the Good News in this sermon? And, you know how thoughts float through your head, kind of like falling stars—sometimes you see them and other times you barely notice they're there—well, words to a song from high school fell into my head. "The King is coming." I noticed the words, in fact, searched to remember the ending refrain: The King is coming; the King is coming. I just heard the trumpet sounding, and now his face I see. The King is coming; the King is coming. Praise God he's coming for me." This song doesn't have good associations—it's attached to feelings of fear, to end of time scenarios, to being left behind—but the words, the King is coming, found a hook and stayed.

The King *is* coming. Advent *is* the time to prepare for the coming of our King, our Messiah, our Savior. But unlike the "left behind" theologies that wait until the end of linear time for the coming of the King, the Good News of Scripture is that the King is coming *and* the King is *already* here. We are waiting for the Incarnation *and* the Word has *already* been enfleshed and lives and dwells among us. Waiting and fulfillment are part of the same whole, just as emptying and filling are a single event. But. This is the end of the sermon! Let me go to the beginning.

The 3rd chapter of Malachi begins, "See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before Me." In the first 2 chapters, God has been speaking out in anger and lament

about God's people: their offerings are not holy; their living is not just. Their worship is unfaithful to their covenant; and their living is unfaithful to the same covenant. God *loves* these people and wants their *shalom,* their well-being, their salvation. For the *entire* community. Loving God is made visible in faithful worship *and* faithful living. Faithfulness to the covenant is manifested in the flesh and blood of the community. And God *wants*, God *longs* to be in a faithful, mutual relationship with us. Because God *delights* in relationship, God is promising a messenger of the covenant, someone who will prepare the people to return to God. This covenant is more than the set of agreements made at Sinai and more than the Scrolls of Scripture. This covenant is *torah,* God's instruction; God's ways; God's wisdom; God's Word, God's salvation. God is promising someone who will prepare the people to, once again, receive God's Word, to return to right relationship. God is promising a preparer of the Way. A messenger of the Message.

In the Gospel of Luke, John the Baptist is named the preparer of the Way. The 8-day old child of Elizabeth and Zechariah was brought to the temple for circumcision while Zechariah was serving as priest. You remember that he lost his speech when he learned about Elizabeth's pregnancy. Regaining his speech after he names their son, he breaks into beautiful poetry: "And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare God's ways." As the messenger of the Message, John is a fulfillment of God's promise. Zechariah knows *who* their son is. And Zechariah praises God. "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for God has looked favorably on our people and redeemed them. God has raised up a mighty savior for us.... Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered God's holy covenant....that we might serve God...in holiness and justice...all our days."

Note that Zechariah calls his son "a horn of salvation" or "a strong, courageous salvation." This salvation that is being prepared, that they are about to experience is political and communal, not the "saving" verb as when Jesus "heals" and "saves" individuals, but the salvation of kings and Caesars, of peoples and nations. This long-awaited son will "give knowledge of salvation to God's people." The salvation that John is announcing and giving will be a light shining on those who sit in darkness."

To shine light on those who sit in darkness. We're sometimes quick to understand this darkness as sin and the light as salvation. But we miss the richness and complexity of the Text if we stop there. Another way to translate this phrase would be, To shine light on those who sit in blindness. So this light will give sight. And we know from the many Gospel stories about recovery of sight that this is so.

Yet another image that emerges here is the darkness before creation. In the beginning. In the beginning God breaks into the chaos and darkness, separating light from dark, assigning boundaries to light and to dark. Light *and* dark make up Day 1. Day 1 is incomplete, it isn't whole without *both* darkness and light. In Zechariah's poetry, we begin to see that this salvation John is preparing the way for is creation altering. Darkness without light is incomplete, unfulfilled, just as light without dark is incomplete. Beauty and salvation are found and experienced when the sight and clarity and birth of light and are in balance with the mystery and hiddenness and dying of dark. The Most High shines Her face on us, separating our light and dark, not getting rid of our dark, but shining!

In our 3rd Scripture passage, Luke chapter 3, the Word of God comes to John, to this son of Elizabeth and Zechariah. And John goes around the region of the Jordan proclaiming the Word of God. The messenger of the Message is crying, "Prepare the way

of the Lord, make His paths straight.... and all flesh will see the salvation of God." All flesh will see the liberation of God. All flesh will see the deliverance and preservation of God. All flesh will see King in the Kingdom of God.

There are some translations that read, "and all humanity, or all mankind, will see the salvation of God." While it's tempting to say these translations are wrong, technically they're not. But they miss the physicality of the salvation John is proclaiming, this salvation that has been promised through the generations. Flesh will see. The Scripture John is quoting and announcing could have read, All eyes shall see the salvation. But this salvation is not something to be observed or watched, it is something to participate in, to embody. All flesh will see. Our bodies are participating in this salvation. Not our spirits or souls separated out of our flesh, or our acts and deeds apart from our bodies, but our whole beings will see and experience and know God's salvation. Just as a day is comprised of both light and dark, so our lives are comprised of flesh and spirit. Our bodies, our living, will see and manifest God's salvation.

In Malachi, the "messenger of the covenant" was promised and the fulfillment waited for. In Luke, John is the messenger of salvation and the one who prepares the way for the Way of God. Covenant and Promise and Word and Way and Message and Salvation are, in many ways, synonyms for the way God is in relationship with Her people and how we are in relationship with each other. The Good News, where this sermon began, is that in Jesus, the Word becomes flesh. The Message is no longer something to wait for, or some One to wait for. In Jesus, the Message finds fulfillment in the messenger, in the flesh and blood of Jesus.

Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise. Jesus is the King, the salvation that we've been waiting for. But if we focus only on Jesus, not seeing Mary and Joseph, not seeing his community, we miss part of the fulfillment, part of the promise. As Joanna pointed to last week, Jesus was conceived and formed in Mary's womb, a pregnancy that altered her and Joseph's life, their present and their future. They emptied themselves and their lives as they were being filled with new life. They waited for the fulfillment of the messenger's promise, the messenger who spoke her conception; and in their waiting they began to experience the fulfillment of God's Presence. Mary saw the salvation of God with her flesh, in her flesh and she broke her body in childbirth. And Jesus gave his body to be broken. And we give ourselves.

In this season of Advent, we *are* waiting for the King to come, not one of royal descent but a flesh and blood baby born to ordinary parents. Born to us. Not a king sitting on a throne but a king who gives his life, his flesh and blood living, to serve the beloved guests in his kingdom. In this season we *are* waiting for the Incarnation, for God's Word to be revealed and enfleshed as promised. We *are* empty and waiting to be filled. But the Good News is that even in our waiting, we experience fulfillment. Just as dark and light are part of a whole, so waiting and fulfillment are part of a whole; emptying and filling a whole. God's messenger speaks to us, "Do not be afraid" and accompanies us, comforts us, is attentive to our concerns and fears as we move from emptying to filling to emptying. In our emptying and in our waiting, when our bodies and our living are being filled and broken and given to each other, the Divine Doula dwells within us and among us, breathing in us, filling us with God's Word so that our flesh, once again, sees God's salvation.

Pastoral prayer

Word of God made flesh
You are our promise
You are our fulfillment
You are our emptying
And you are our fullness

We come before You in our brokenness
In our darkness
In our pain
We bring You our prayers
Those we have spoken to each other
Those we hold deep in our hearts
Silence
Receive our brokenness and make us whole
Shine light into our darkness and save us
Bring comfort to our pain and heal us

Fill us with Your Word
Fill us
That our flesh will see and know Your salvation

Word of God made flesh
You are our promise
You are our fulfillment

You are our emptying
And you are our fullness

We come before You in our fullness
In the beauty of Your light
In the comfort of Your presence
In gratitude and joy
We bring You our prayers
Those we have spoken to each other
Those we hold deep in our hearts
Silence
Receive our praise and gratitude
Our joy and celebration
Receive our fullness
Empty us that we may be filled again
And again
Our flesh seeing and living Your salvation
Amen.