

12-4-16 "Not John, Jesse" A Reflection on Romans 15:4-13 by Mark Arbisi, Christ Church, KBK

You know Christmas is approaching when each and every day post Thanksgiving Day your mailbox presents you with a half dozen or so shinny catalogs from your favorite and your least favorite retailers. I don't really understand why they do that because I am not one to *ever* order anything from a catalog. Fortunately they don't send those things out throughout the year. Can you imagine!

Another sure sign that Christmas is near is in the church when we're reintroduced to John the Baptist, as our Gospel lesson does today—you know our Gospel lesson, that's the one we're not visiting with, the one you can read at home. John of course really needs no introduction to most all of us. John of course is rather, well, "old hat", what with his camel hair robe and his honey-locust diet and his fiery short sermons on repentance. Pretty much everything that could be said about John has been said and most of us have at some time or another heard it. Now, to be clear, this is not to take anything at all away from the man whom Jesus described as the greatest of all the prophets. Hardly! I actually am kinda fond of John's unorthodox, in-your-face style—just shouting out the good news with little to no regard for the political and social consequences. It's gutsy and it's way cool! To let you in on a little secret, I wish more of us humble preacher types did more of that more of the time. I wish I did. It's just that today I've decided not to preach about a Baptist. Which also means I'm not gonna preach about a Presbyterian or a Lutheran an Episcopalian. And yes, no Congregational light bulb jokes either.

This morning I thought we'd spend a moment with Paul—he is a harbinger of good things to come too you know. But I also thought it would be fun to spend some time with Jesse. Yes, Jesse...and maybe, just maybe, for some, Jesse does require an introduction. And no, Jesse wasn't a preacher, or a prophet, or even a Lutheran. Jesse was, well, just a dad; and based on what I can tell, just an ordinary, run of the mill dad, a farmer by trade. As we heard, quoting from Isaiah, Paul mentioned Jesse in his letter to the Roman church: "*the root of Jesse shall come...*" Sound familiar per chance? Perhaps because though we sing "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel" we could just as well be singing "O Come, O Come, Root of Jesse"; were it not for the obvious fact that it fails to flow off the tongue in the way "Emmanuel" does.

So, "Who precisely is this Jesse guy?" you ask. Well, if "Emmanuel" and "root of Jesse" are interchangeable then you have your answer already. Short answer, we're talking God here. More specifically, we're talking the annotated One, the Messiah, the Christ...yes, the One whom we daily live in anticipation of interacting with, in much the same way we daily live in anticipation of relating to God. Just as people always have done; as people in Isaiah's day did; as people in Paul's day did—just as you and I do.

As an historical figure, Jesse was King David's father. King David was the first of Israel's kings, and generally considered the greatest. So, stay with me now, King David is the first king of the Jews. And who is it we celebrate on Christmas? The ultimate, the final King of the Jews? Get it? Yes, there is a direct lineage here stretching from Christ Jesus back to King David—Bethlehem being the house of David—and from David, naturally to his father, Jesse; and then back yet again to the Father of us all, who of course is the Father of Jesus. And....stay with me...again, as we visit with at Christmastime each year: *"He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being, in him was life, the life that was the light of the people....yet the world did not know him."* So, simply put, "Jesse's root" is Jesus. Yes, in this case Jesus is like a pair of bookends: one at the beginning, who set all things into being and the other at the culmination of all things—the day we hope, pray and struggle for, the day love and peace reign supreme. Makes perfect sense now, right? If not I suspect we've discovered why most preachers preach on John not Jesse.

Today's lesson from Romans is said to be the culmination of Paul's letter, arguably Paul's most influential letter. Very simply the crux of what we hear has to do with the inclusion of outsiders, implying that the future of the Church, indeed our faith is dependent upon including outsiders, aka, "the Gentiles." In other words, our hope, our faith hope, our church hope our future hope as friends of Jesus is inseparable from building dynamic communities which include those who presently or who in the past have been excluded. In Paul's time, the word to describe all such outsiders was "Gentile". Over the centuries we've sadly acquired many, many names; it seems we have a way of naming people who are different from us with special names. Just fill in the blank. But it should be as obvious to us as it clearly was to Paul that the future or our faith is dependent upon inclusion, not naming, welcoming not separating, rejoicing in diversity not pointing out differences.

And indeed, the central verse of this central passage in today's lesson speaks to precisely this; as it is written: *"Welcome one another, as Christ has welcomed you."* That's it. That's our faith. Everything unique and wonderful, everything blessed and gracious and loving and forgiving about everything which makes our faith our faith hangs on doing precisely that—welcoming one another in the same joyous, praiseworthy way Jesus lived time and time and time again. *"Welcome one another, a Christ has welcomed you."* Do, nothing but, nothing more, nothing less, than the Christ-like-thing, and simply be a "safe place" for all people. So profound, so simple. So important. Kinda like a safety pin.

Friends, these holy days we've entered are a time set aside to, with the eyes of faith, look around, look forward, look backward, remember our long faith tradition and the people of faith past and present. Remember too who and whose you are; remember what is most important, what Paul highlights today. From the beginning of time God's plan for all of us has been to unite us truly into one family, one humanity where Jew and Gentile and every other sort of human being has a safe, loving, home...not merely for the holiday's but for all our days. To this end we are called to participate. To this end we have a Christ-light on our path. *"In him we shall hope."* Quoting Paul, *"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."* -Amen.