

Liturgical Date: 4th Sunday in Advent

Text: Matthew 1:18-25

Grace mercy and peace be to you from our Lord and Savior Jesus. Our text is the Gospel from Matthew 1.

We are now exactly one week from the arrival of Christmas. Parents and probably school teachers are pulling their hair out. After all, the past weeks have been spent in a fruitless effort to keep calm those children that are wired with excitement due to the coming festivities. There is of course a break from school, but more than that is the glorious Christmas morning haul of brightly wrapped packages. (also, all the sugar from those delicious Christmas cookies probably doesn't make things any better).

Maybe it is for this reason that the legend of an every-present and always-vigilant Santa Claus has arisen. Santa is the one who "sees you when you're sleeping. He knows when you're awake. He knows when you've been bad or good so be good for goodness sake." In theory anyways, with all that bright wrapping paper around, the legend helps to keep all that Christmas excitement "under wraps" (pardon the pun). Whether or not this is actually effective in keeping the levels of excitement under control, well that is up for grabs.

Now, as children grow up into this legend, somewhere along the way, they find themselves with a bit of a scientific or perhaps even a philosophical sort of a problem. Apparently, throughout the year, Santa is keeping an eye on them. He is monitoring their behavior to know whether they should be on the naughty list or on the nice list. The inquisitive minds of children start to ask, how does Santa do that? How does Santa manage to keep track of all of those kids on that naughty or nice list?

We grownups have a similar sort of a dilemma. We have a similar sort of a philosophical problem that we do our best to work out in our heads. We have a definition of God that we do our best to work out in a practical sort of way. God, we say, is "omnipresent". That is to say, he is present everywhere. There is no place where God is not. There is no place where there is no God. God fills the earth, He is Lord of all and he fills the entire universe. This leads us to ask all kinds of questions about how God manages to do this. We wonder about his size, how big he is, you know, trying to figure God out or somehow think of him in a way that makes him obey all of those rules about time and space that we have to obey because we are a part of the created world. Thinking about God scientifically or philosophically, we can wind up asking the wrong question.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 24 says this:

1The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof,
the world and those who dwell therein,
2for he has founded it upon the seas
and established it upon the rivers.

It begins with the fact that the entire world, all of creation and everything and everyone who lives in this world and around this world and even under this world is God's creation. He made it. He made you. And... therefore... it and you and everything is His possession. We are all God's possession.

And yes, God fills the universe. God is here and there and everywhere and there is no place where we can (as the Psalmist puts it) "run from his presence". ¹

But there is a distinction. And it is easy for us, when we only think of God philosophically, that we can fail to distinguish between God's general presence where he just kinda *is* everywhere and God's gracious presence where he comes in Word and Sacrament to serve us and bless us and hear our needs and meet with us face to face. We confuse the two and think that they are the same. The danger here is that God becomes Santa who sees you when you're sleeping and knows when you're awake, who in theory has a naughty list and a nice list but in the end winds up putting everyone on the nice list in the end anyway. When we lose that distinction, we are easy prey for the devil who would have us believe that because God is everywhere he is with me just as much when I am on the golf course, or out in my tractor, or around the Christmas tree with my kids, and therefore going to church is not all that important. We fail to make an important distinction.

Our Psalm asks a much different question. It asks,
3Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

3Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?
And who shall stand in his holy place?

That is a much different sort of a problem. It isn't about just being where God can see us, like a kid trying to appease Santa and stay off the naughty list. It isn't just about God being with us in our world. It is rather about us being with God in his world. It's about having access to God in his house; being in His holy place, the sacred place, that space where God brings heaven and earth together. And not everyone is permitted an audience in this Holy place.

The Psalm puts it like this:

¹ 7Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence?
8If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!
9If I take the wings of the morning and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea,
10even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me.
11If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light about me be night,"
12even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is bright as the day, for darkness is as light with you.

3Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD?

And who shall stand in his holy place?

*4He who has **clean hands** and a **pure heart**,
who does not **lift up his soul to what is false**
and does not **swear deceitfully**.*

5He will receive blessing from the LORD
and righteousness from the God of his salvation.

*4He who has clean hands and a pure heart,
who does not lift up his soul to what is false
and does not swear deceitfully.*

The interesting thing about this Psalm is that back in the days of the temple, when the people of God came to appear before their Lord to inquire before him and seek his blessing, not everyone was permitted to enter. Certainly it was limited to the Jews, to those who were sons and daughters of the covenant, but even then, the priests would stand at the entrance to the temple and examine those who would come with this formula; do you have clean hands (have you kept the commandments, the second table of the law about you and your neighbor). Do you have a pure heart (that is, have you obeyed the first 3 commandments – that have to do with you and the Lord) And then, have you lifted up your soul to what is false, (have you appeared before an idol – a false god – to ask favor from it). Only those who had **clean hands and a pure heart, who did not lift up their soul to what is false and who did not swear deceitfully**. Only they could ascend Zion and stand in God's holy place.

So, friends, here you are. You have come to Zion. I want to share with you some verses from Hebrews 12:18-24 (page _____ in your pew Bible).

18 For you have not come to what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest 19 and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them. 20 For they could not endure the order that was given, "If even a beast touches the mountain, it shall be stoned." 21 Indeed, so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, "I tremble with fear." 22 But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 24 and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

You see, where we come when we come to the Divine Service (that is to say the service of worship with God's Word and with the Sacrament of Holy Communion) is not the Holy Mountain where the Israelites stood in fear and trembling where they could come and hear but not approach. They were in the presence of God, but at a distance. Instead we, because of and for the sake of the sacrifice of Jesus... we are granted entrance up to the mountain

where no one could go. We are on the mountain, with God, with angels and the saints and God who is the holy and righteous judge, and Jesus who is the mediator of a new covenant according to his own blood.

Our sermon text is Matthew 1:18-25.

Mat 1:18-25

(ESV) 18 Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly. 20 But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us). 24 When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Understand why this is important.

you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, 23 and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and You have come to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect,

You have come and you are not worthy to stand here in this place. Your heart is not pure. Your hands are not clean. You have lifted up your soul to what is false. You have sworn deceitfully. And you are not ready. You are not worthy. You are not worthy to ascend his holy hill and stand in his holy presence.

But Jesus has come down. Jesus, who is Immanuel, God with us, has come down. And his name is Jesus, his name is Yeshua... Yahweh Shub... the Lord Saves. And he shall save his people from their sins.

It is in one week. Next Sunday, one week from today. God's people will gather together here, in God's holy place in God's holy presence and he will come down. We will present our requests before him and he will hear. We will receive blessing from the LORD and righteousness from the God of our salvation. And Jesus, God who came down at Christmas, will come down again. We will stand before Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and we

will receive [the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel](#). We will receive the holy body and blood of Jesus to eat and to drink for forgiveness and strength.

So where is Jesus? Where do we find him? Here there and everywhere? Yes, he is there. He is in our world, in our homes and in our lives. But here we have access to him in his world. In his house, in the heavenly realm. We can appear before him and stand before him in his Holy Temple and be fed by him so that our hands and heart are made clean and so that we are given forgiveness life and salvation.

In the name of Jesus.

Amen. And now may the peace that passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.