

God is Dangerous©

UNDER WRAPS©

The Gift We Never Expected

Nahum 1:3-5; Matthew 2:1-3

December 7, 2014

Rev. Sharlyn Gates

Today, on this second Sunday of Advent, we have lit the second candle ... the candle of peace. So, you may think that the theme of peace and the sermon title for today don't quite match up. You may be wondering how in the world we could say God, in Jesus, brings peace, yet also say in the same sermon that God is dangerous.

Have you ever thought of God as being dangerous? I admit that most of my thoughts and images of God are images of love and gentleness, of mercy and grace. I don't normally think of God as dangerous.

What do you think?

I'd like for you to watch this short video ... on our brand new screen ... and then we'll consider what we've seen and how it might apply to this title of God being dangerous.

VIDEO ILLUSTRATION ("UNDERPASS")

What did you see in this illustration? What stood out for you?

In the video, 2 young women walk underneath and over pass and wait for a light to change before crossing the street. As they look around, they discover a woman, who appears to be homeless, sitting alone, leaning against the concrete wall. They stare at her and look at one another and back to her. Beside her is a sign that reads "Hungry. Please help." The woman suddenly looks up and meets their gaze and they quickly look away. In their faces, you see ... what? Curiosity? A desire to help? Some fear and uncertainty? In the end, they both turn away and cross the street, leaving the woman to watch them go. Next to the woman, we see a gift, wrapped in Christmas wrapping with a red bow. What does it mean?

God's mighty power brings danger. God is not tame. And Jesus came to right the relationship between God and people that was initially severed when Adam and Eve turned away. As C. S. Lewis writes in his book *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, God is not "quite safe ... but he is good."

In the Old Testament, Abraham, Moses, and Jonah were called by God to do tasks that were dangerous, and for which they each felt ill equipped.

The call required Abraham to leave his home, to pack up his family and his animals and life and to go where God would lead him. It was a life of a nomad, wandering the desert, living in tents. And Abraham was not a young man at the time when God called him to move.

And look at Moses. Hidden in the river as a baby so the Pharaoh's soldiers would not kill him, as he had ordered all Hebrew baby boys to be killed. Moses, who was found by Pharaoh's daughter and raised right there in the palace, later stood up for the Hebrew slaves, killing an Egyptian soldier, and fleeing for his life.

Then God spoke to Moses in the burning bush and told him to return home to Egypt, back to the palace, back to Pharaoh, and tell him God wants him to let God's people go. All the thousands of Hebrew slaves.

And don't forget Jonah, called to go to his enemies' home, to go and preach to the Ninevites. He tried to run and then he tried to bail out into the sea, was swallowed by a whale and spat out onto the ground. At last he went as God had told him. God gave all of them the strength and protection they needed to fulfill their calls.

Maybe you've heard the saying that "God doesn't call the equipped; God equips the called." Well, our Old Testament family members certainly lived that saying! They offered us proof of what God can do, even when the circumstances are dangerous.

But it wasn't just the Old Testament heroes that God called into dangerous situations. Jesus had a dangerous mission, for sure. Arriving unexpectedly, he was certainly not the kind of leader the people had hoped for.

The Magi traveled a great distance to visit the baby Jesus. Imagine how disturbed King Herod must have been when he learned they were searching for a king that he knew nothing about! And so, once again, orders to kill all the Hebrew babies were sent out.

Not only was Jesus' mission dangerous, but the people around him were often in danger as well.

Jesus taught with authority, and many people loved him; but, the religious leaders ... not so much. Jesus turned religion on its head, calling his disciples to leave everything and follow him. They were summoned to a mission that would change the world.

Jesus healed every spiritual and physical malady, and the disciples would, too. Their mission was exciting, but it also was dangerous. It cost many of them their lives.

We, likewise, are called. God's call pushes us out of our comfort zones, just as the disciples were pushed out of theirs.

So, where might God be calling us? What seems dangerous about the call to follow him? Or, does it seem dangerous to you? I mean, we don't live in Syria or other Middle East countries where followers of Christ are being executed if they won't convert to Isis. What danger are we in?

We are called to be church members but, as far as I know, none of us have been beckoned by God to leave the safety of this country to go off and be missionaries, like Gwen and John Haspels, Presbyterian missionaries in Ethiopia.

I told you recently about them. I spent time with John and Gwen when I was in the Parsons church. They were both from a nearby town in Kansas and when they returned to the States, they would come to our church and speak, showing us slides and videos of what they were doing in Ethiopia – building roads and schools, sharing the Gospel of Jesus Christ when the time was right.

But their work was dangerous. While they made many friends and a number of people became Christians, there were certainly enemies as well. Not long ago, I asked for prayer for them. I discovered they had been attacked on the road, both of them badly beaten and are still critical in many ways in their recovery.

While we can send money and lift up missionaries like John and Gwen, that isn't really dangerous for us, is it?

So how does God being dangerous fit into our lives?

Have you ever been in a similar situation as the two young women in the video? Have you felt your heart strings pulled as you think of someone enduring the bitter cold; someone living on the streets with no food, hungry, sad, hopeless?

Do you see them on the street corner, holding signs, asking for work, or food, or a little money? Do you want to help, but aren't sure if you should, or how you can help? If you give money, do you wonder if it will really go towards food or be spent on alcohol and drugs?

If you speak to them, are you in danger? And what kind of danger might you be in? Real, physical danger? Or, are you afraid the danger might be more in getting involved and finding yourself emotionally attached to a stranger?

I ask these questions from a personal standpoint because I have had all those feelings and thoughts and fears. And when I've prayed that God might use me, really use me to

make a difference in someone's life ... I tell you, it never fails ... someone comes into my life, and it's usually at an inopportune time; an interruption to a busy day.

Or I have personal stuff going on. And here they come. And it's never, ever easy. It's always complicated. And I find myself having all kinds of feelings – from compassion to skepticism, from wanting to help to being a little irritated that it's come NOW.

And then I remember my prayer. I remember my commitment to the call to care for God's people and I just want to cry because I feel so inadequate, so unsure of what to do.

Yes. I think God is rather dangerous. At least answering the call to discipleship is dangerous. If we look at Jesus' life and at all those early disciples and the early church and many, many people after that. It may not always be dangerous physically, but it can be emotionally. It can alter our lives, it can change the direction we're going.

You see, I'm convinced that while God has given us the gift of the Church – a place to come to worship and praise God together; a place for Christian fellowship – a place for developing bonds of like-minded people; while God has giving us a place to learn and study about His Son, I don't believe the intention is to just be disciples inside these walls.

This place should be the place that propels us out into the community and the world full of hurting people – to share the dangerous good news with all we come in contact with, believing that when we care for the people God places in our paths, it is just that – not a coincidence, but a plan. Paul even says we might just be entertaining angels.

And Jesus said when we care for the poor, the sick, the homeless, those in prison - we are caring for Him.

Is God dangerous? If we are serious about being like Christ, about answering our call – to the people and places where God leads us, then yes ... God can be dangerous.

But how does that go with the theme of peace? If we think about Jesus and all that he did and all that he said, we know the peace he brings is not the same thing as what the world gives. It is an inner peace of knowing we belong to Him. We are safe with him, no matter what happens to us. In fact, we will have *more* peace by following this dangerous God – than if we don't.

And as we do, we are helping him establish peace on earth ... until he returns again, as he has promised.

God may be dangerous, but he is also faithful. In what ways have you seen God's past faithfulness bring strength and protection to you, and to this church, as you have stepped out in faith to do his will?

Think on these things and ask God to show you – and us together – the mission he is calling us to – and to give us the courage to do it.

And don't forget to be thinking about the gift under wraps – the gift we never expected. But, what it is? Find out ... Christmas Eve!

Amen.

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