

Christmas Eve, 2010

Pastor Wayne Peterson
December 24, 2010

Elisabeth Moen was just three and a half years old when her family became part of the St. Barnabas community back in 1991. Liz is obviously a diplomat, for with her dad having gone to Luther College in Decorah and her mom to Gustavus Adolphus, she split the difference and went to St. Olaf where she majored in political science. Liz studied abroad in Tanzania in the fall semester of her junior year and she so fell in love with the country and its people that after graduating from St. Olaf this past spring, she decided to go back to Tanzania for a year as a volunteer teacher. She is teaching English at Magulilwa (Mah-goo-leel-wah) Area Secondary School, which is like high school. It is located in a very small community in central Tanzania and this fall, a couple of months after Liz arrived, the school celebrated the arrival of electricity and running water.

Liz doesn't have access to the Internet very often because it requires a trip to the city of Iringa. But when she's in Iringa she goes to an Internet café and blogs about her experiences, giving the whole world the opportunity to read about what she's been up to. I'm one of the nosy people who checks the blog from time to time, which is how I came upon this story. Liz is currently home for a few weeks while the school has a semester break and I got her permission to share this little story with you.

Liz' task is to teach English to teenage boys and girls who are just like teenagers here, meaning that attention spans can be short, discipline can be a problem, and cutting class is a frequent occurrence for some. To make the task even more daunting, one of her classes has 40 students and the other has 70 students!

In one blog posting, she talks about a day when the lesson was about prepositions. She writes, "for those of you fluent English speakers who may have forgotten, prepositions are words like under, around, on, into, in front of, beside. The first class, I explained all the words as best as I could (try to explain the word 'for' without using it. Just try.), and quickly realized that demonstrations were completely necessary. So I had the whole class do all kinds of crazy things like stand ON their chairs and put their noses UNDER their desks. They seemed to like it, and I think it actually worked."

As I read that, I could imagine the class acting out the actions indicated by these prepositions. But what really stuck with me was her challenge – "try to explain the word 'for' without using it. Just try." So I tried. And I failed. I could imagine ways to demonstrate under, over, around, on, and in, but "for" is indeed a challenge.

When I started thinking about my sermon for Christmas Eve, Liz's challenge came to mind again because the significance of Christmas, of God stooping to take human form, can not be expressed or understood without the preposition "for."

Listen to some phrases from our scripture readings again with your ears tuned to hear the preposition “for”:

From Isaiah: a child has been born **for us**, a son given to us

From Titus: the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation **for all**

From Luke: The angel said to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy **for all the people**: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

On Tuesday evenings I convene a discussion group over here at Jake’s which we call Theology on Tap. Each week we pick a theological question and discuss it. The past few weeks, we have been chewing on the words and phrasing of the Nicene Creed, pondering why the Christian leaders back in 325 chose these words rather than others. (By the way, among the Christian leaders meeting in Nicaea was a bishop from the town of Myra named Nicholas, as in “St. Nicholas”. Yeah, that one. I think it is really cool that St. Nicholas helped write the Nicene Creed!) In the creed is a phrase about Jesus Christ that I had never paid much attention to: “**Who for us and for our salvation**, came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the virgin Mary, and was made man.”

It is apparent from these scripture passages and the creed that one can not understand the significance or import of the Christmas gospel unless one can grasp the meaning of the preposition “for” because each writer says that Christmas has something to do with the phrases *for us*, or *for all*, or *for all the people*. But as Liz found out in trying to teach English to non-English speakers, the preposition “for” is not easily explained, which would account for why so many people, even some Christians, do not fully comprehend and marvel at the significance of Christmas.

Of the many dictionary definitions for the preposition “for”, and in one dictionary I checked there were 19 definitions for this little word, the one that is most fitting in this situation is: *indicates the object or recipient of a perception, desire, or action*. And here’s the unspoken part of that definition – if “for” indicates the object or recipient of something, it implies that there must be a subject, a someone who takes the initial action. In short, the word “for” in these passages describes a relationship between God (the subject) and us (the object).

In tonight’s scripture readings and the creed, the phrase “for us” does not mean just “for those of us who are Christians.” All humanity is included in this “for us”. The phrase “for us” declares the mystery that God is love. The term used by the New Testament writers for God’s love is *agape*, which means what we might call “pure love” – a love that seeks the good of the other, not because of any benefit to oneself, but simply for the sake of the other. God’s love is always and forever “for us” and it seeks us out continually no matter how indifferent we might be to it. In the little letter called First John we read: “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that God loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins.” (1 John 4:8-10) To put it simply, when we read the whole story of Jesus, from his birth to his resurrection, we do not learn how we are, but how God is.

One more part of the Christmas good news is to realize that God's love is not simply for humankind in general, but for each one of us in particular. The you in "for you" is to be understood as both plural and singular. Almighty God, the creator of the entire universe, loves each of us with an always and forever love that is most persistent in our times of difficulty, distress, and grief. By becoming human, entering the world in the messiness of a stable, God displays a love that seeks us out in all the areas of messiness of our lives. The preposition "for" may be a small word, but it is the carrier of the entire message of Christmas. To say that "Christ was born" says nothing of any consequence. To say "Christ was born for you" says everything. Merry Christmas!