

Christmas Eve/Day, Yr. A

December 24/25, 2016

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7; Psalm 96, Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Once again on this Christmas night we gather and hear this wondrous story. The central stories of Christianity – the Christmas and Easter stories – are so familiar, so beloved and so powerful in their own right that they captivate us and, though we hear them over and over, we never tire of them. As we listen to the Christmas story, we gather at the manger and wonder about the Journey that Mary and Joseph had to make, we're appalled at the fact that there was no room for them in the inn, we see the animals around the manger, we gaze at the shepherds, startled by a sky suddenly full of angels who tell them about the birth of this child who is good news of great joy for all people. The story has seeped into our very bones. The story is so powerful that we can be tempted to hear it and stop right there.

And yet, we'll miss something if we stop at the surface of the story, because it has deep truths to tell – about God, about us, about life. Start with the birth itself. The birth of any child is a disruption to the status quo – a welcome disruption, but a happening that means that everything is changed forever. If that's true of every birth, it's much more true of the birth of this particular child. Luke tells the story in such a way that we understand the context of the story – the Romans are in power: Quirinus is governor of Syria, Augustus is emperor. Their power is such that they seemingly can order everything – Augustus is called the savior of the world, the Pax Romana is in effect, they've ordered the whole world to participate in this census, so they know who and where everyone is in the entire empire. It's a great metaphor for total control. And yet, in spite of all that power and control, in the very midst of it, something new and unexpected is happening. Something quiet, something unheralded, unknown, uncelebrated. God's kingdom is breaking into the tired world, bringing with it a whole new way of understanding reality, of understanding what the whole thing is about.

There's an old woodcut that I've seen in a couple of places that shows an ancient person living in a world that's depicted as completely enclosed. The world he is living in, with its sun and trees and villages, is covered with a dome that contains the moon and stars. But on ground level, that person is poking his head through the barrier of the dome, looking beyond the enclosure in which he is living, and seeing an entirely different universe, a whole different world. And that, I think, is one of the most powerful truths of the Incarnation. It gives us a whole different view of God, of Jesus, of ourselves, of one another and of our purpose and destiny.

Perhaps most crucially, the birth of Jesus changed the way we think about God. Before Jesus, God was a spirit, holy, pure, powerful, distant, unapproachable, completely OTHER. You probably know that only once every year, during the high holy days, could God be approached. And only by the high priest. There's a story that when that high priest entered the innermost court of the Temple, the other priests would tie a rope around his ankle, so that if he was struck dead by entering the presence of God, they could just pull him out, without having to go in themselves. A powerful sense of God as transcendent. But then, with Jesus, there's an entirely new understanding: now we see God as a fully human being. Before Heaven and Earth seemed completely separate realms, with no way to bridge an immense gap. But the

Incarnation is like the construction of a bridge between the two. God, as Jesus, builds the bridge and walks across to join us in our humanity. Jesus comes to show us: THIS is what you are meant to be. THIS is what a fully human life looks like – it's full of love, compassion, healing energy.

I'd like to share two thoughts about this. One is something Thomas Merton wrote about the Incarnation as bringing these two realms together – this is writing from the theological, abstract side of things:

“Today eternity enters into time and time, sanctified, is caught up into eternity. Today, Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, who was in the beginning with the Father, in whom all things were made, by whom all things consist, enters into the world which he created in order to reclaim souls who had forgotten their identity. Therefore, the church exults, as the angels come down to announce not merely an old thing which happened long ago, but a new thing which happens today. For today, God the Father makes all things new...”

And then a story, which was shared by a friend and which was written by a priest who was trying to make the point about the incredible power of Christmas, this time from the very human point of view. The story is that a family - mother, father, an older child and Erik, a one-year old - had spent a holiday in San Francisco, visiting family and they had stopped for lunch on the way home to L.A. The mother is telling the story and says that the restaurant was nearly empty. Then she heard Erik squealing with glee, pounding his fat baby hands on the high chair and saying “hi there!” over and over. He was alive with excitement. She turned and saw that the source of all this glee was an old man dressed in a dirty, greasy, tattered, worn coat, with toes that poked out of would-be shoes, a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over it and a face that had gums as toothless as the baby's. The man responded to Erik: “Hi there, baby; hi, there, big boy! Do you know patty cake? Do you know peek-a-boo? The baby continued to laugh and answer “Hi, there!” The mom said that the whole scene was getting louder and more embarrassing. Her husband went to pay the check, telling her to take the kids out and meet him in the parking lot. She said she thought, “Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik,” and bolted for the door. She had to walk past the man to get to the door and tried to do that, hopefully side-stepping him. But when she reached the man, Erik, with that universal baby's pick-me-up gesture, reached out with both arms to the man and she was now face-to-face with him. Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The old man said, “Would you let me hold your baby?” The mother said there was no need or opportunity for her to answer because Erik propelled himself from her arms to the man. The baby laid his head on the man's ragged shoulder and the man's eyes closed – she saw tears on the lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled the baby's bottom and stroked his back. The man cradled Erik in his arms for a moment and then he pried the baby from his chest and said, “God bless you, Ma'am. You've given me my Christmas gift.” The mother said she ran to the car, clutching the baby, with tears in her eyes, saying, “My God, forgive me. Forgive me.” (Bausch, William in *More Telling Stories*)

The priest telling the story says that in his mind, Erik is the meaning of Christmas; Erik is God, with his zeal and passion for us with our tattered lives and our tattered hurts, our tattered

relationships – making no distinctions, but wanting to embrace each and every one of us. Christmas is not about a kind of soft sentimentality; it's about a God who loves us and desires, with great passion, to be with us.

I recently was asked to be one of the examining chaplains for some people who were in the ordination process. One of the questions was about the Council of Chalcedon, in which the church struggled to find the language to describe Jesus Christ as both fully human and fully divine. In other words, to talk about the meaning of the Incarnation. The answers were historically and theologically accurate, but none touched the incredible mystery and gift of what we're celebrating tonight. And none of them quoted St. Athanasius who was one of the council members who said simply, "The Son of God became man so that we might become God." The Eastern Church calls this deification – that we're called to walk in the footsteps of Christ, all the way back to that way of being for which we were originally created.

One final story. It's about a little girl who got the part of the star in the Christmas pageant. After the first rehearsal, she came home with her costume, a 5-pointed star lined in shiny gold tinsel designed to drape over her like a sandwich board. "What exactly will you be doing in the play?" her mother asked her. "Oh," came the reply, "I just stand there and shine."

That's it – Christmas is our invitation into a whole new way of being human, an invitation to live into the broadest possible holiness, into the broadest possible understanding, into the broadest possible hearts. So we can all just stand there and shine.

Amen.