

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Second Sunday After Christmas
04 January 2015

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 31:7-14 Psalm 84 Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a Matthew 2:1-12

A continued bloody Christmas to you all! Do you want to translate that from English into American, Ray? (*laughter*) It doesn't mean very nice things, but it's used an awful lot. But Christmas *is* bloody. Think about what we've celebrated since Christmas Day and we're still in the season of Christmas. The day after Christmas, the Day of St. Stephen, the first Christian martyr. Two days after Christmas, the day for commemorating the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, martyrs, who in Herod's insane rage, about which we just read in the Gospel, all little boys under the age of two slaughtered because Herod the Great was scared.

We celebrated a bloody festival on the first of the year, or we *used* to. Eight days after Christmas works out in our calendars to be New Year's Day, and in the calendars of the Church from about the 4th century until our lifetime the Church used to commemorate on New Year's Day the Circumcision of our Lord, sometimes called the Circumcision and Naming of Jesus. Now it's been reduced to the Naming of Jesus or the Name of Jesus. It was, for those who keep record of such things, the shortest Gospel appointed for any day in the Church year: "*And they took the child, circumcised him and called his name Jesus.*" And then we took the Gospel and circumcised it, cut it in half, and reduced the celebration to the Name of Jesus. We really have to ask why that happened. We really need to own the possibility that there is some anti-Semitism or anti-Judaism in there. We do continue to celebrate Old Testament feasts in the life of the Church which we get on Groundhog's Day which is the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple, the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the great meeting between God and humanity in that celebration in the life of the Church, a pre-Christian celebration. And in Christian art sometimes the circumcision and the presentation in the Temple are conflated into the same piece of art. Jesus is often depicted being presented in the Temple and circumcised at that time. There are questions about who circumcised him. It was the custom for Jewish mothers to do that for their own boys at one point. Where he was circumcised - in a stable, in a cave, who knows?

But the point of all of it is that we have in our institutional life - and we do have an identity as an organization - we have chosen to eradicate a very real and important piece of the life of Jesus (a) as a Jew, (b) as someone who feels pain and bleeds, and (c) was a boy.

Has anybody gotten rid of his Christmas tree yet? James said, "*It's time for us to take down the tree.*" I didn't think it was ever time to put it up. (*laughter*) But here we go. In the life of the Church we must not fail, it seems to me, to remember in these days what goes on in the biblical record and in the life of the Church about remembering what the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus is all about. God inhabits gender, culture, language, society, politics, this world in time and in space. And so, believe me, I'm all for the advancement we've made with feminism, but what do you do about the maleness of Jesus? I heard one cagey theologian refer to it as the scandal of particularity.

Well, it's the problem of making the incarnation an event that happened two thousand years ago and it's no longer related or relevant to any one of us, male or female. It's the mistake we have made as a Church of worshiping God in one person rather than believing that God is to be worshiped in persons, every last lousy one of them whom we encounter in our journey in life.

Can we resurrect from our on-going bloody celebration of the incarnation. The incarnation requires blood. You don't get meat without blood. The en-meat-ment of God, the en-blood-ment of God, the en-flesh-ment of God, the business of God living in this world. Is there something between the incarnation and now two days hence, the Epiphany, where the reality is taught, confessed and celebrated by the Church as a reality. You know our Orthodox

friends will celebrate Christmas in two days on the Epiphany, and we will remember Epiphany if it happens to fall on a Sunday and pretty much ignore it otherwise, but the Epiphany is the part of the nativity that's most important for us because we're not in the major part Jewish. That gift was to the Jewish people, and you ain't! And it means you're out. You're not clean, you're not holy, you're not deserving, you're not righteous. You are a foreigner. You are not entitled to this gift because you don't have the right bloodline. You're dirty. You eat the wrong things, you wear the wrong things, you worship the wrong God.

And then here is this extraordinary baby. Can you imagine a baby frightening the daylight out of Herod the Great? I mean it makes a mockery of him if you think about it. And it was his son, by the way, who was responsible for the killing of Jesus in the crucifixion. Some things are genetic, I suppose.

In the Epiphany the Church, we the gentiles, the outsiders, the unjust, the impure are given - this is our confession - are given the gift that is given to the household of faith in the person of Jesus. It is the guys from the East, and my suspicion is that you could smell them before you could see them, and they would have been glad to sell you the perfume before they got there. And if you couldn't smell their perfume, you could smell their wealth. It is they with whom we need to identify because they are the foreigners, the outsiders, the pagans, the non-believers, and they came and they encountered in a cave or in a cradle or in a junkyard or on a filthy barn floor or wherever it was - God in the person of Jesus. Very unlikely and very unnecessary - a gift that God did not need to share and a gift that we often act as if it's ours to own, and a gift that we think we have no need to share frequently while we're taking care of ourselves. To hell with the rest of the world, right?

And so we approach the Epiphany - and the Epiphany is a multi-layered celebration in the life of the Church. The first Epiphany was of Jesus to the shepherds and then to the wise men and then we have the other Epiphany of Jesus at his baptism when the heavens open and God says, "*This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased.*" And I suppose we could add the Epiphany with the - this is my own edition I suppose - in the Transfiguration when the heavens open again and God from God's own mouth says to us, to our own ears, "*This is my Son. I'm pleased with him.*" This is God sharing a gift which was promised to Israel with the world. And that gift - we talked about this last week - early in his life became an immigrant in the flight into Egypt. Anybody here ever been to Egypt? There are only three things, I think, that exist in Egypt: pyramids, sand and garbage. I have never seen such filth in life-giving canals as I have in the canals that run through Cairo - unbelievably dirty. And for the hours that we were in caravan on buses preceded by armed guards, followed by armed guards and with an armed guard in each bus, I saw nothing but sand - sand, sand, sand and then pyramids.

So a very inhospitable country becomes the safe haven for Jesus as his parents protect him from the insane rage of Herod the Great.

This is a Coptic icon painted by a Coptic person whom I met when I was in school. And the thing about Coptic icons often is the heads seem larger than they should be. That's an indication of their holiness. Icons, as you know, communicate meaning. Well, in this icon the most meaning I get out of it is the jackass is smiling. Is there a job here for me? (*laughter*) Well,

that's the point, isn't it, that we could in our faithful response to this gift, be the jackass who carries the Christ on our back into safety or into our lives and into the world into the lives of others.

There are palm trees here for a reason since there's nothing in Egypt but sand. Of course they very rapidly became hungry and there's flowing water down here - very rapidly became thirsty - filled with fish. And of course there are wonderful apocryphal stories that aren't in scripture but they're in other writing that didn't get included in scripture - that the holy family stopped at a cave and there was a dragon in it but when Jesus got off of the donkey the dragon left. And that lions and tigers and bears walked along with them with their heads bowed and their tails wagging. And also Joseph went with his three sons from a previous marriage. Got that? Salome the midwife went along. When the heat was too much there were palm trees and when hunger came there was fruit on the palm trees which Joseph couldn't reach and the angels bent the trees down so they could have the fruit of the palm trees. And water sprung up from the dry desert for their comfort.

One of the most interesting things in this icon is this field of flowering grass or wheat or whatever it is. There was a tradition that the holy family passed a farmer planting seed and overnight the seed grew into full fruition. The next day soldiers pursuing the holy family from Herod came and asked the farmer whether or not he had seen the holy family. He said "yes" and the soldiers said, "*When did you see them?*" And he said, "*When this field was planted.*" (*laughter*) And so the soldiers turned back.

The important point of all of this, it seems to me, is that we have a God who enters this world and from his earliest days understands the immigrant experience, understands what it is to be an unwelcome guest in an unwelcoming country, in a foreign land without papers, without documentation, without resources and to understand God's presence with them then and there, despite the hostility of the geography and the demography, the place and the people. In that inhospitable situation our savior survives and then returns when after a couple of years news arrives of Herold's death and they don't go back to Jerusalem but to a dump called Nazareth. Nazareth probably comes from the word *netzer* which means a little shoot off of a trunk of a tree. "*From the stump of Jesse shall come out the sprout.*" The business of Egypt is probably some typography of some creative early Christian mind somewhere saying, "*Jesus is like Moses and leads from the sands of Egypt and slavery to freedom in a promised land.*"

One of the early traditions was that a frond of the palm was taken from those trees on the flight into Egypt up to heaven where it blossomed and grew so that all of the saints who went to heaven could have a palm frond which is why they're frequently depicted with palms in their hands. And of course the parallels with the Entry into Jerusalem at the end of Jesus' life and the palms being used as a carpet, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera.

So I think that we as faithful people need now after all the shouting and wrapping paper and decorations and other garbage in our society that takes place at this season and is called Christmas, need to pause and think about the gift we receive from God in the person of Jesus who is not limited to an event two thousand years ago but who by our belief and confession lives with us - and now get this, friends - in us, in our flesh, in our blood, in our bodies. You didn't

hear anything spiritual about that, did you? Completely incarnate, a God who lives in us in this world not because we are loveable but because God is generous. And we have the nerve, and I do think it is unmitigated nerve and gall, along with St. Paul, faithfully to say that together we constitute the Body of Christ. And in our life and work together it behooves us always to evaluate and understand what Christ might look like to others who encounter us individually and corporately. What do we make God look like in this world? And too often, I'm afraid, it has been a cheap, wealthy white man, and that's what I like about my buddy Frank. Do you know what he did today? He appointed fifteen new cardinals. And do you want to guess where they come from? Africa, Asia, and the one that touched me most - I could have gone to tears - Morelia in Mexico. I went to Mexico at least three times to study Spanish years and years and years ago in the state of Morelos. I know the poverty there. And every time I came back from Mexico I came back a wealthy man from having been there. And I remember the Bishop of Cuernavaca, Mexico, was a man by the name of Mendez Orceo who was commonly understood to be a communist. He was known as the Red Bishop. A little fat guy in an old Spanish colonial cathedral and as you know the Spanish colonial cathedrals in Mexico and all over the world are built right over the holy places of the people who were there before. So I'm sure if you excavate underneath the cathedral at Cuernavaca you'll find a pyramid.

I remember in that cathedral frescoes of the martyrs of Japan, missionaries who went to Japan and were crucified upside down and all the rest of it. I also remember a beautiful baldachin over the altar, a sort of square piece and on it were painted the palms of two black hands. I think this is calling down the Holy Spirit over the altar. I also remember in the cathedral at Cuernavaca a large font at the door of the church and a sign on it: "*Don't throw your money in here. This is not good luck.*" High theological understanding.

But the thing I want to tell you about Mendez Orceo was when he would walk down through a swarm of his people whom he loved, you knew where he was because bishops have crosiers, a bishop's staff. His was the trunk of a broken-off sapling. So here is this little fat man with a stick going through his people and I cannot remember what he said but I remember him sitting in the cathedra in the middle of the church preaching to the congregation of poor people whom he surely loved and understood to be the wealth of his diocese.

The incarnation for us is a lively hope that the world can be a different and better place because God lives in it. And so it was I heard my buddy Frank again this morning use a phrase that I heard him use within the last week - second time he used the same phrase. The first time was a re-run of the *Urbi et Orbi* benediction which he does at Christmas. *Urbi* - you know what an urb is, you know what a suburb is - outside of the city. *Urbi* is the city. *Orbi* - you know what an orb is - the world. So it's a blessing for the city of Rome and the world. In the *Urbi et Orbi* speech he was talking about poor and disenfranchised children underneath our eyes. And after he talked about them he said something about our complicit silence. The translator translated all the stuff about the kids under our eyes and never said a word about our complicit silence. Today he talked about peace having to be made: "*We have to do peace. We have to construct peace in our relationships, in our families, in our world.*" And in talking about peace, he talked about our complicit silence about not constructing peace. He's got it right, I think. And so it is that we are a part of that incarnated God which still lives in the world, which cannot be packed in a shoe box along with your little manger scenes and put in the attic to gather dust for next year, and if you

can you're missing the point. We're talking about the lively engagement of us and our being by a living and Almighty God who says to us, *"I ask your permission to live inside of you and in your organization together, in your relationships with each other. If you are going to call yourself the Body of Christ may I prove that you are by using you to do ridiculous and radical things."* The great ridiculousness about God being born in the person of Jesus is it scared the pants off of Herod the Great just by being there. Do you suppose (I do) that by our just being here and not being bought out by the world or any other garbage - just by being here we make a confession that Christ is present in us, through us, and how it is we relate to each other and to the world. We, as we recalled in the beginning, are the outsiders. We're not members of the household of faith. We don't have the right bloodline. We're the foreigners, the geeks, the gooks. We are the undocumented citizens in the household of faith. And yet we believe, teach and confess that the incarnation is shown to us as clearly as it is to Israel. And the welcome comes to us to believe it, accept it, and allow it to live in us or not.

After Epiphany comes Lent. After we are shown this gift and given it freely - and I must repeat this - not because we deserve it, earn it, or are worth it - but if we accept this gift of the understanding that it comes to us by virtue of the generosity of the Creator, then hang on because that's going to make us into generous givers of God's love to all who need it. So the business of the Church is not for those who deserve it but for those who need it. And our confession - this is why I think maybe Lent comes after Epiphany - is to take stock of ourselves and say we need this and as we accept it we understand that we shall be used to share it.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.