

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
1 January 2017

Scripture readings:

Numbers 6:22-27

Galatians 4:4-7

Psalm 8

Luke 2:15-21

Earlier this week I went to light candles on the fifth night of Hanukkah with friends. It was a lovely, beautiful experience and I was told at that time, as we lit our little models of the menorah in the temple in Jerusalem, that it is done in the window, as were ours in the window of that home. The host explained to me that's to prove to the world that you're a Jew and, by extension, not ashamed of that.

Then later in the week I received a video which I forwarded to the congregation about a situation in Billings, Montana. It's a community which I think is relatively closely knit but which had suffered a hate crime. A brick was thrown through the bedroom window of a six-year-old boy who had put a menorah in his window. The response of the people in Billings was to say, "*This is not a place where we will accept or ignore - which is also accepting - hate crimes.*" So they united in their response to this horrible event. A day or so later the local newspaper printed a full center fold-out picture of a menorah, and everybody in town put the menorah in their window. So that was going to be a lot of bricks for whoever was that hateful. The statement was made that as a community they stood together.

I asked my friends that evening whether or not Jesus would have known about or celebrated Hanukkah which of course occurred a long time before Jesus was around. Probably not the way it's celebrated today because apparently in contemporary Judaism Hanukkah has become a response to Santa Claus and an answer to some of those things in the surrounding culture.

Our conversation then turned to circumcision which is the feast we celebrate today whether or not you know it and whether or not the Church Calendar tells you. It used to until about 1960. It used to mark the first of January, which was eight days after Christmas, as The Circumcision and the Name of Jesus. I think it was at the time of Vatican II that the calendar was changed, and today in the Roman cycle is the Feast of the Most Blessed Virgin Mary. I remember when Lutherans put out new worship material in about 1978 that one of the changes from previous worship materials the first of January which had been The Circumcision and the Name of Jesus had become simply The Name of Jesus. It's an interesting factoid. This was the Sunday that the Gospel Lesson for the day was the shortest one of the year. It used to be: "*After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.*" That was the entire appointed gospel for the day - one verse. And then in the 20th century we circumcised that and cut off the circumcision in our consideration and just focused our attention on the name of Jesus.

My Jewish friends informed me that a child in Judaism doesn't have a name until he is circumcised. It made me scratch my head and it still does. Why? Why would the Church delete that from our celebration today? I've had my ideas over the years. They're probably all wrong, but of course this happened in the 60s and it finally arrived in Lutheranism eighteen years later about 1978. I blamed it - wrong-mindedly, I'm sure - on feminism gone bad. There is that problem with Jesus which some theologians refer to as the scandal of particularity - If the savior of the world is going to be a human, must it be a male? But I always suspected - and frankly, friends, I still do - that in changing the name of today's celebration just to the Name of Jesus, there might be more than a whiff of antisemitism in that decision. The argument is given: It's a pre-Christian Old Testament festival. But we pay attention to other Old Testament festivals like the Presentation of Jesus at the Temple. The Pennsylvania Dutch are good with that one, aren't they? Groundhog's Day. It's coming the second of February.

Why is it we have such reticence about remembering that eight days after Jesus was born, he was circumcised? And why, you might ask me, am I passionate about remembering that? It's not a prurience about genitalia, but it is a reminder to us of what the incarnation really means and stands for. I shared with you sometime in the last week the information in a monogram by a man named Leo Sternberg who studied Renaissance art some years ago. His book is entitled *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art* (that's 500 years ago) *and in Modern Oblivion*. Nobody has changed those paintings, but he suggests that when we look at paintings - particularly of the Virgin and Child and especially of the visitation of the Magi - we fail to see that often the Virgin is separating the legs of the baby, pointing at the genitalia, and usually the eldest Magus, the oldest of the Magi, is kneeling in front of the child and is looking directly at his crotch. Why? Well, for living proof of this cockamamy idea that in Jesus God becomes a real human being, and what's more real than that? What's more human than that? Because there *were* other ideas - we call them heresies - that Jesus looked like a human but wasn't really. And if you're going to call Jesus God, God can't experience pain. Therefore, when he was circumcised nothing hurt and he didn't bleed. Well, yes, he screamed like mad and his little penis dripped blood. Real man, fully human, which is why we decorate the Christmas tree with red and white roses - to remember that what we say about Jesus is that he was fully human - perhaps represented by red roses - and fully divine - perhaps represented by the purity of white roses. And the roses remind us of the Medieval carol that we sing of Mary: "*There is no rose of such virtue as is the rose who bore Jesus.*"

So here we are faced with an invitation on the first day of the year to revisit the idea that at Christmas God chooses to become a human being in a very unique and wonderful way in the person of Jesus. You know I spent a certain amount of energy at Christmas time trying to not worry about the virginity of Mary. Mark, which is probably the oldest gospel, doesn't say a thing about the birth narratives of Jesus. Doesn't care! I think the virginity business comes into play in the early Church when people are waking up to the idea about how really special Jesus was so it was important to say that his birth was really special and his mother was really special. I think God worked hard in Jesus to prove that Jesus was a man and in no way special except without sin. That's what the Church says.

It's important for me at least to keep these things relevant to me and my experience as a human being. Is there anybody here who isn't? So if we're going to use Christmas as a way to remember the incarnation, I think it's ok to remember the birthday of Jesus - comma - but not period. I think it's ok to remember that Jesus was, in fact, born a real human being sometime - one of the 365 days of the year. The likelihood of the 25th day of December is a long shot. The importance of that birth is that God somehow desires to invade, occupy and live in the human frame, in a body, in that which my Aunt Gertrude used to call "a bag of bones" when she would pick me up as a child and sling me over her shoulder and carry me up the steps and offer to sell me. *[laughter]* Bag of bones!

We are going to the altar in short order to face a plate with some pretty unlikely bread on it and a cup filled with wine, and we will refer to that as the blood of Christ. And I ask you when is the first time this person bleeds? This is the work of salvation from the beginning of the child's life. And the reason we go to the altar is not just to remember but to participate, if you will, in the incarnation ourselves, to do and be what it is. St. Paul calls the Church - the Body of Christ. And that means today by God's activity - as much as it was God's activity 2,000 years ago in Jesus - by God's activity to be called into being as Christ's living body alive and at work in the world today as we are united to each other in our baptisms, in our faith and in our gathering, to be fed by God who asks the same ridiculous question of us that God asked of Mary: "*May I crawl inside of your body? Will you allow me to make you pregnant? Will you carry me in yourself? Will you bear God Almighty in your flesh?*"

Flesh is what we know best, most intimately. Flesh is all that we know. So why on the eighth day after a birthday celebration of a Jewish boy would we forget or choose to obliterate the circumcision?

Now in speaking about circumcision with my Jewish friends I thought I was being very wise and very, very scholarly. I said, *“This is my opinion. I have no argument for it, but I think circumcision was what ancient people came up with to substitute for human sacrifice. Most ancient cultures we know sacrificed children. Wouldn’t that be a neat way not to have to kill your kids but just mutilate the boys a little bit. Nobody could see. There would be blood, there would be screaming, but the kid would live. Now that makes sense to me.”* My Jewish friend raised her finger and looked at me and said, *“No. It’s all about the contract, all about the covenant, all about the relationship between God and God’s people, and that is the sign of the covenant.”* Well, who am I to argue? I just had a brilliant idea which I still think is pretty brilliant. *[laughter]*

However, it then occurred to me that this is why Jesus becomes so important in history. He gets and has and believes and lives with a different sense of the relationship between God and humanity which is way less of a contract than it is a love affair. In our relationships we only need lawyers when it’s falling apart. When we love each other we don’t need a contract. When it’s falling apart, we do. I think Jesus brought a radical suggestion that in God’s relationship with the world it’s God’s desire to be in love with us rather than to see us as contractual partners, that God is not in business with humanity but in love with us. Now that’s radical! It undoes religious institutions, it undoes hypocrisies, it undoes the human desire to be better than someone else. It completely disassembles religious superiority and rectitude and righteousness. It invites us to humbly accept the offer of a loving God with whom we are not worthy to have a relationship but who nonetheless says, *“ I love you and I will attempt to prove this to you in the person of Jesus. I love you enough to die for that love for you, not because you are worthy of my love but because you are my daughter, you are my son, and therefore you are related to every other human being in the world - not because they deserve it - because you don’t either - but because they also are my children.”* That’s the incarnation that screams when it’s cut and bleeds when it’s cut. It laughs when it’s happy, and it loves beyond a contract. Now that’s Christmas! That’s real! That’s human! That’s divine! And that’s where we are in my opinion.

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