

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
21 December 2014

Scripture readings:

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16 Psalm 89:1-4, 19-26 Romans 16:25-27 Luke 1:26-38

Last Sunday afternoon here when the ecumenical congregation gathered for the Service of Lessons and Carols I was astounded when after all of the lessons and singing of the Advent-oriented service concluded and we moved into the Moravian Love Feast we started to sing Christmas carols at which time I turned toward my Moravian colleague with all of the hauteur and arrogance that I'm capable of, and you know that's an awful lot (*laughter*), and said, "*Well, there goes Advent.*" I thought of it afterward and I thought, "*Well, go ahead, be arrogant about your own tradition. You'll have a really fine conversation that way, won't you.*" Sorry about that.

But it's still Advent. Joey Pettinato knew that there were three days until Christmas at the eight o'clock mass today. He's got that down pat. By the way, it's the shortest day of the year, the shortest day of daylight in the entire year. From here on in the cosmos in the world that we inhabit we can expect to see longer and longer periods of sunlight.

Speaking of light, I was in - of all God-forsaken places yesterday - the American Candle Shop. They did have the little red candles I want for the Christmas tree that they didn't have before. And, yes, we do light real candles on the Christmas tree. It's the German thing, you know. I said to the woman who sells candles...We've had an interesting relationship. She's finally figured out that I have in the past bought candles for the church which means I produce the tax-exempt slip and I don't pay the tax. She said, "*Are these for you or for the church.*" I said, "*These are for me.*" I said, "*You must be very busy.*" She said, "*No. All the people are up at the jewelry counters. They're buying gems, not candles.*"

And it was a mess, and I hate the press at the season, all of that stuff. It drives me personally wild. But as I pushed my way through these (to me) insane crowds of people - and you know candle shops sell more than candles, don't you. There's all kinds of junk - pious things like Santa Claus kneeling at creches. Yeesh! But there was a sign - you know the kind that you buy for your friends - "Kiss the Cook" and all of that. There was a sign and it simply said, "P.S. There is hope." Well, it was cockeyed and it was stood on end but I could read it. And I hate to admit that somebody selling a junky sign in a candle shop connected with me at that moment.

As we prepare for Christmas it seems to me we're preparing to receive the God who was willing to come into the God-forsaken junk-ridden candle shop of our lives with a message of hope that will not be solved by the purchase of anything but will celebrate the gift that God makes of God's self to God's world.

Who'd like to go along and preach at a funeral this afternoon in the middle of this season? Last night at the Kruegers' home I sat on the sofa next to Jean Warring whose husband died this past year. (She's doing really well.) I talked about what I have to do later on today, and I said, looking at her, "*I guess if the message isn't the same now, the message isn't the same anytime. If it's the same message, it's the same message now and at the funeral home as it is at any other time or day of the year.*"

And that, friends, is exactly what draws us together through all of the mess and brings meaning into the junk shop of our lives, is that we believe, teach and confess and we inherit this extraordinary idea about a

God who is willing and able and much more capable than we are, a God who's willing to find us in the middle of the mess and to love us and to bring us, even though it seems cockeyed and on its side, a message of hope. And this is an ancient message. Did you hear the psalm today? *"I am persuaded that your love is established forever."*

If that is the message - and I believe if that isn't the message we're lost - but if that *is* the message then that message is good and stands and serves us as we will say when we get to the altar. And by the way, did you see this beautiful new fair linen which Jeanette has created for us and quietly placed there without a word. You don't know how to do it, Jeanette. I have to teach you this: *I did it all by myself*. Thank you. It's beautiful! We finally have an altar linen that fits the altar.

But this message of God's love and this message about a God who is way more faithful and looking for and finding us than we are at looking for and finding God. And so it is if the message is good and I believe it is good, true and faithful, our job is to appropriate that, to find meaning in it and to use it for our lives together and our encouragement of one another and for our care of each other and the world in which we live.

We're not stupid. We know we live in time and space which means we are creatures with beginnings, middles and ends. We are creatures who cannot reach beyond our grasp. We're confined, we are limited, we are creaturely. And we are not Gods. Now that's the spelling lesson. You've all heard it before, but let's review it. We are not Gods, capital G-o-d-s. Our confession is that we are God's, capital G-o-d-apostrophe-s. We belong to God who puts us into time and into space in these limitations with the promise that *"I am with you always. Under every circumstance at all times and in all places unto the end of the age I am with you."*

Christmas, if we can plow through the junk and there's plenty of Christmas junk - and I must tell you I am a human being of culture and society and I find most of it profoundly depressing and I hope not so because it pulls those strings of religious arrogance and superiority that I worked on Greg Shafer about "There goes Advent." It's just generally depressing that we as a society, culture and people look so desperately, *so desperately* for meaning and miss the point so clearly or profoundly or abjectly or terribly.

The meaning is met in the message of the angel which we read today. And the angel is talking to an impossible situation. I think the pope would allow me to say this today: We have two impossible women in this story today. Both Mary and Elizabeth, both impossible mothers - one is too old and one is too young. Elizabeth is way beyond child-bearing age and Mary shouldn't have had a baby at that age. And the message to these impossible situations is God will come forth from your flesh in a tent of guts and bones and skin and hair and organs and will live in the world in that temple. So the Orthodox Church has an icon which parallels the icon for the second of February. You didn't know the Orthodox Church had icons for Groundhog's Day? Well, the second of February is also in the church calendar the Feast of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. The second of February is 40 days after Christmas. Count them. According to the Law Mary and Joseph take Jesus to the temple. You know the story. But there is an Orthodox icon of the Presentation of Mary in the Temple which follows the same pattern as the icon of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. But there person being presented in the Temple *is* the temple herself. Haaa! And the message of Jesus is, the message of Christmas is, the message of the angel is, the message of the angel to Mary and to Elizabeth is: God chooses to use you two little impossible women as a temple of eternal presence and a medium to express Divine Love to the world.

We have this extraordinary text in Samuel today, 2 Samuel, about this discussion about whether or not King David who lives in a very fine house - I think he lived in Clarks Summit (*laughter*) - and decides that God should move out of the pavilion behind the house and have a house as luxurious as his. Yes, you

Episcopalians know the Cathedral of New York, don't you - The Cathedral of St. John the Divine, one of the largest churches in Christendom. Have you ever seen the house next to it which was built as the bishop's house? Very large Fifth Avenue style mansion - the story being that when the founders of the cathedral, who included people such as J.P. Morgan and others, were planning the cathedral they planned this extraordinary mansion for the bishop of New York with the understanding that the bishop should live just like the rest of us. *(laughter)*

Speaking of which, I told you I was in a conversation with Jean Warring. You know Jean and Rees lived in the rectory at Elm Park Methodist Church in Scranton which at one point had been the largest Methodist Church in the world. She explained that that gorgeous rectory, which you pass when you get off of the expressway and go into Scranton, had been moved from where the education wings are to its current location to build more to the church. But the entire top floor of that house was designed for servants. Well, they provided them the house. The didn't provide the servants.

So here's this discussion in 2 Samuel about David - I'm going to run the risk of saying David's guilt work of living so lavishly that he thought he could buy God off by building a nice house for Him too. And God says, *"You know I've done really well in my trailer. I really don't mind tooling around with what's hooked onto my chassis here. I've lived with my people. I've gotten around to many places I would not normally get to if I were confined to a house."* There is this discussion between Nathan and David about *"Yes, we'll build a temple"* and then a second thought, *"Maybe not."*

So the last Sunday of Advent we stop and pause to think about God's request, not only to Mary and to Elizabeth but to you and to me, to enter the world in our flesh. Now the business of being confined to space and time is that request is not an eternal request but a temporal one. *"I wish to live in this world and in the space you occupy here and now and in you."* Now under any circumstances that is a ridiculous and outrageous request, especially considering where it comes from - God through an angel. And both Elizabeth and Mary have good reason not to say yes to their pregnancies. One's too old; the other's too young. One's too smart and the other may be too simple. Who knows what their reasons are. But in both cases both women, not knowing but believing, say yes. And that's all there is to it. They don't know what's coming. They know who is there. They don't work out whether or not it's feasible, whether or not their bank accounts can tolerate it, whether or not they have enough equipment, preparation, the right wardrobe - none of it. They, in the limitations of time and space that they have, are asked from an eternal source, *"Would you constitute the tabernacle of God in the world today in that little sack of flesh and blood and bones which is your body?"* And both of them say *"Yes."*

Yes, there is hope. And St. Paul in the early church "gets" it. And St. Paul also understands that there are questions to ask about this. It's probably the portion of scripture that I've read more times in my life publicly than any other. It comes from the Book of Romans. I'm not a biblical scholar or a Bible quoter. It's just not a part of my makeup, but in Romans St. Paul says there's a list of questions to ask about this. If in fact God is for us and if in fact God chooses to live in us, if in fact God wants to be born in us today, well then what can be against us? And St. Paul knew that others were going to stand outside of the tradition and say, *"Hah, but your father died."* *"Hah, but you don't have a big bank account."* *"Hah, you drive a Plymouth."* *"Hah, you have a Kelvinator and not a Sub-Zero."*

Paul understood that there would be all kinds of challenges to our faith that God comes to us and asks to live in us and he asks the questions, *"Then what can separate us from the love of God? Are these proofs that God doesn't love us? Height, depth, angels, principalities, powers, things present, things to come, death, life - Are these proofs that God doesn't love us? No! In all things we are more than conquerors. Our faith is*

stronger than that. In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us." For Paul and we are convinced that nothing - neither height nor depth nor angels nor principalities nor things present nor things to come nor life nor death can separate us from the love of God which we come to know in Christ Jesus. That is our hope, that we have a God who is called - and Mary is instructed to name her child - Emmanuel, God with us.

Just pause a moment and consider what we know about the lives of Jesus and Mary, and it's not much but it's enough to let us know that they were not living the large, good North American life. They were people, both of them - Elizabeth too, and John the Baptizer - they were all people confined to time and space and the human experience. They knew joy and they knew sorrow. They knew happiness and they knew what the pits and depression of life were. They knew it all. And two thousand years later we remember them as embodying in a special way the reality and presence of God in the world, and they weren't excused from anything and in fact we read on in the story of the annunciation to Mary from the angel and she's told she's going to have a hellish life. *"A sword will pierce your heart."* She will watch the one she brings to life and loves most be tortured and abused and assassinated for nothing more than saying what it was that she believed - that God was with them, that God loved them and God loved everybody else. That's why God can't tolerate a temple of cedar because it confines the Divine message way too much and severely. You can put the candle out next to that holy bread any time you want but you'll never put out the light of the Almighty because that bread communicates something that travels with each of us as we receive into the world and far and wide and eternally.

I've used the illustration before but it remains a good one: as we approach the altar at every Eucharist we say with Mary and Elizabeth, *"Be it done to me according to your will"* and in fact at this Eucharist we open our mouths to be impregnated by God. We open the alimentary canal of our bodies to receive the flesh and blood of a living God who says to us, *"May I live inside of you?"* Now you can spend your entire life in theological schools and try to explain that. Good luck! But as a community of faith we can happily say with Mary and Elizabeth, *"We don't understand this but we do believe it."* We believe God comes and says to us, *"I prefer to live in tents rather than houses of cedar. I prefer to live in each of you."* And God figures out how to do that. We simply proclaim our belief that God *can* do that even with us at every Eucharist when we recall that on the night he was betrayed Jesus took bread, broke it, gave it to his disciples and said, *"This is mine and it wants to go into yours."*

The problem with Christmas as culture celebrates it - and you know it will be over on the 26th of December, don't you? What will be the next? Valentines - decorations will go up on the 26th. Is that the next one? Oh yes, the Super Bowl. I forgot that. What we're talking about cannot be taken down with the decorations. What we believe cannot be bundled up with the creche figures into a shoe box and stored in a dusty attic until next year. The nativity we prepare to celebrate is in fact the incarnation of God which is not a two thousand-year-old rusty idea about a Jew in the Middle East but about us in Hamlin and here and now and in this place and in these bodies of ours which are male and female, young and old, cranky and happy, sick and healthy, rich and poor, black and white, that it is human flesh without qualification that God asks us to inhabit and which God is in constant prayer to us to say, *"Be it done to us according to your will."*

Now who cares who is at the jewelry counter? And so we have a message to go with us to the funeral home today that our belief is that nothing, not even the great mystery and heartbreak of death, can separate us from the greater mystery and joy of God's love. P.S., there's hope, and our hope is real!

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