

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The First Sunday in Advent
3 December 2017

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 64:1-9 Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18 1 Corinthians 1:3-9 Mark 13:24-37

Yesterday at the funeral I made the point that going to the funeral on Saturday didn't count for attendance on Sunday. It didn't work. It wasn't meant to be serious. The point I was trying to make is that the idea of our relationship with God as a contractual one is a very, very difficult idea to rid ourselves of. And it was Mary herself, the grieving mother at the funeral, who called me a day or two before and said, "*I know this is from my Catholic upbringing. I know differently, but it's important to me to believe that my son Jim came to Jesus before he died.*" I told her at the funeral yesterday that I really didn't care, that what I care about is that Jesus comes to *us* while we are alive.

The problem of this idea of a contractual relationship with God is that it's rooted in very old - and I dare say dysfunctional - ideas of God as an angry old man in the sky who sits and waits in order to punish us when we go wrong and who makes sure that our life here is very unpleasant so that our life when we're dead will be great forever. Now you can shake your head all you like, but you know those are popular religious ideas. They are current ideas, and when a grieving mother whose 39-year-old son has died, says, "*I know this is a problem, but I need to work this through,*" it's worth pausing a moment at the beginning of a year to say: Well, what in fact is a better concept about God and our relationship with God? And what does Jesus say about our relationship with God? Well, it ain't *that!*

You've heard the expression, "*That's a face only a mother could love.*" If we're honest, that takes some doing, and Advent is four weeks long. It probably won't be long enough, but work on it until you get to Christmas. If we're honest and we look at ourselves in a mirror and have in our other hand the Commandments, we know that as human beings we are sinners only a loving mother could love. But that difficulty of ours should not change our image of who God is. I think this is what cost Jesus his life. He took on the entire religious institution, the entire political establishment, and the entire economic reality of his day and said, "*It doesn't work that way. I don't believe in that kind of God. I am not in the business of being anything other than being loved by God and therefore in the business of doing nothing other than loving other people - all other people!*"

The Church perpetrates this concept - cockamamy as it may be - that Jesus is a propitiatory sacrifice, a sacrifice to pay up for our sins so that we can go to heaven. Jesus is the bank in which we mortgage our sinfulness to an angry - pitiful, I might add - God in the sky who wants to kill us for being sinners. Cockamamy as it may be, it's popular. But Jesus perceives God in a different way. And don't get too arrogant, you Christians out there, that this is a Jewish view of God as opposed to a Christian view of God. Because the first words in Holy Scripture, which were there thousands of years before Jesus ever showed up, were: "*In the beginning God creates the heavens, the earth, and everybody in the earth.*" And then what does God do? She stands back and loves what she has created. You don't think God wears trousers, do you? Let's hope not. But that's a popular concept. You see what I'm getting at.

This morning I thought I have spent a lot of energy in trying to de-construct the myths of the Church, particularly as we come to Advent and the Nativity. We understand that these are later additions to the biblical narrative. It becomes important to make Jesus important. Therefore, we invent a mother who hasn't had sex. That makes it better. Well, it makes it so much more irrelevant to us. I'm sorry, I don't need Mary to be a virgin for Jesus to be important. I'm sorry, my needs are for Jesus to be a good Jewish boy who screamed bloody murder when on the eighth day after he was born, he was circumcised and bled, who had trouble with his mother, came from a dysfunctional family - his parents weren't married - and you may remember words that he said: "*Mother - who is my mother? Who are my brothers and sisters?*"

I know we get this Rockabye Baby Jesus concept going at Christmas of "*Isn't this lovely*" and baby powder and... Well, he's born on the floor of a barn, and you know what's there before he gets there.

We're talking about a religious idea of a Jewish man two thousand years ago which took on the popular concepts that were in place for thousands of years. What were those ideas? I am loved fully and sufficiently by God no matter what I do. As a mother loves her daughter, her son, her child - who is either a Goody Two Shoes or a rotten scumbag. I haven't had children but I do have an understanding of some degree or another of what parental love is like because I have been loved by parents whose love I have not deserved and by God whose love I have not deserved. But in all of these examples and instances that is love which has given me life. That is love which I have received and

appropriated and accepted - I hope - sufficiently to make my life different and then to make my relationships with everybody else in the world different - different from those whose concept about God is that God has love that is *earned*.

Do you really think that God is so damned screwed up that he had to send his son to be killed in order to forgive you and me? God didn't kill his son. *We* did. Hatred, fear, disbelief of God's love is what kills Jesus, not a wack-a-rama God - male at that - angry and distant.

But people simply couldn't grasp that they were loved by the same God who loved their worst enemy because that enemy is also a child of the same loving Creator. Religion gets pretty simple, and we like to make it complex and complicated.

So as I was thinking about how I have personally tried to de-construct the myths around Christmas and the emphasis and the need for a virgin birth and all of this stuff - how about if we just take Jesus at his word and say what he believed and lived and taught was really divine. And I would like to think that Mary had divine sex with somebody for him to get here. Then I thought, well maybe Advent is a time to **re**-mythologize these stories because when we make our confession we confess that we are by nature sinful and unclean and cannot save ourselves. So how are we saved? By something from outside of ourselves. So we need a myth, a legend, a tradition, a story that is larger than humanity. And I guess if we're going to do that with anybody, Jesus is as good a person as there is to do it with. A divine being living as a man in a world two thousand years ago in a culture with a language, a human being who in the words we will get to in a couple minutes at the altar - "*who lived and died as one of us.*" Not a bionic, magical, spiritual being, but a real flesh-and-blood, bloody, screaming, circumcised baby with identity and sexual equipment and a miserable mother and all the rest of it. A God who lives with us and who is known by us as we know each other, who brings to us this promise - that no matter where we are, who we are, how we are, no matter what our problem, our sin, our addiction, our difficulty, our background, our color, our gender, our whatever - we have a God who says, "*You are the person in whom I wish to live.*"

So I get impatient with Christmas as the Nativity which is the birth of a Jewish baby two thousand years ago, which is pretty much irrelevant. If you don't think it is, walk down a main street somewhere and see how much of that you get - which isn't Santa-Claus-ificated before you get it. Or instead of the Nativity which is the myth as opposed to the reality, the truth of the gospel which is the Incarnation, that we believe and teach and confess a God who is not dead and who lives in human flesh today. And where is that human flesh? What did you see in the mirror when you stepped out of the shower today? That sad sack [*laughter*] is where God chooses and wants to live here and now. And if we believe that, the world will know it not by anything we say or do but by how we treat each other and the rest of the people in the world.

Four weeks of Advent may not be enough to take on what it is we mean by Nativity and what it is we mean by Incarnation, but I'll tell you this truth, folks: Every time I come here in this dumpy little box in Hamlin built in 1847... it's not so dumpy. I was built in 1947. It's a hundred years older than I, and I'm in worse shape than it is. Every time I come here and you are here and we gather for worship, I know in my experience that God is present. It has nothing to do with magic bread or magic wine, but it has to do with those who come and take a nibble and a sip and say, *We believe that God, in fact, not only can, but wants to and will live in us if we give God that chance.*

And I leave here after every liturgy knowing that God is here. Thanks to you for that, and thanks to God for her willingness to come and be with us now and always. And in that belief we gathered yesterday in the face of unimaginable, inappropriate death and said that our job is to give thanks because we live between the mystery of birth and the mystery of death with the mystery of love in between.

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