

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Fourth Sunday in Advent  
18 December 2016

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 7:10-16   Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18   Romans 1:1-7   Matthew 1:18-25

I cannot tell you how delighted I am with the ecclesiastical calendar this year. We get a whole week before Christmas after Advent IV. Sometimes it occurs that Christmas is the next day or you get a shortened week in between, but this is a really nice, lengthy, beautiful Advent season. I don't know about you, but I don't care how long Advent is or isn't, I'm never ready. Are you? I'm also never on time, so what's the difference? *[laughter]*

But the question is what are we getting ready for in Advent? What are we waiting for? Why do we get so excited that we might light an extra candle? Well, one of the things that we're waiting for is to remember the birthday of Jesus. With kids that's the easiest way to explain Christmas, but that's two thousand years tired. I didn't know him personally anyway. Did you? That's across centuries, millennia and cultures and languages of difference to remember a birthday. And we probably have the date wrong anyway. It had nothing to do with snow so dream on, *White Christmas*. There is more than one interpretation of "white" too, isn't there?

But I think it's important that we remember that somebody was born, that Jesus is, in fact, in our knowledge of history and the scriptures, an historic person - possibly (and I encourage you to give this some time in your imagination) illegitimately conceived, not by God ...unless you believe that all conceptions are divine. Does it really matter - the whole sexual component, the whole virginity component of our tradition? Does it really matter whether or not Mary had sex? I hope not. And if it does, then my question to you is what did the Creator do wrong to make us as we are? Because there's not a person in this room who isn't a sexually created and a sexed being her or himself. Certainly there's biblical precedent and invitation in the stories that we read as we get ready for Christmas that make sex look bad or that equate sex with sinfulness.

I had an apple for breakfast this morning. I bought a bunch of different kinds and there was a yellow one sitting there, and I thought, "*Perfect for Advent IV.*" I have no idea what the relationship between yellow apples and Advent IV might be, but I made that mean something to me. Then, as most people do, I sat over my breakfast apple with a Latin dictionary in my hand. Didn't you? *[laughter]* I'm aware from the dark and distant and confused past of studying languages that the word for apple and the word for evil are pretty much the same word in Latin, but I wasn't sure about the German. The apple is neuter, and the German word for evil also is the gender for the apple tree itself and for a pole. How's that for phallic?

You see how deeply rooted our preconceptions about our human nature are in terms of fallen sinfulness and the prejudice we get about human sexuality as equatable with sinfulness. But this is a church which believes, teaches and confesses that God becomes a human being, a sexed, limited by time and space, blood flowing, bodily fluid emitting human being, that God in all of her eternal grandeur and wisdom chooses to cripple herself in the body of a human Jew two thousand years ago. I don't think that there's a problem with God entering the world by virtue of a sexual relationship if God's going to enter the world through a birth canal. The problem I have with all of that stuff about virginity and all the rest of it is it disassociates or allows a disassociation for us between our own situation and the gospel, the good news of God entering the world as a human being. And it allows us an excuse, a way out, a back door to our believing that we somehow are intimately involved in being the incarnate God in the world today. It makes what we sing in the Christmas carol irrelevant when we sing "*Be born in us today.*" If sex and sexuality exclude Jesus from being born otherwise, then how can we expect to be the incarnation of God in the world today as the Body of Christ because nobody

got here without sex. Now as difficult as it is for all of us to imagine our parents engaged in the conjugal act, a part of sex is humor perhaps and maybe we need to chuckle a little bit at what happened at Christmas in this - I'm willing to call it - illegitimate child being born.

The gospel for today invites us to think primarily about the progenitors of Jesus - Mary and who knows whether or not it was Joseph? It's not clear. But what *is* clear is how Joseph, by the encouragement of God through an angel, treats Mary with full respect. Her situation in Church and society notwithstanding, he looks at her and acknowledges an equal human being who herself, perhaps, is in a pickle or a fix or a compromised situation, and he offers to withdraw from that situation to make it easier for her, to make it easier for society, to make it easier for the Church. Let's assume for a moment that it isn't his child. In fact, it's not, according to scripture - it's God's. Now can you imagine God having sex? There are those who call that divine.

So here we are, faced with this extraordinary celebration which probably requires years of theological thought in terms of extracting what it means to celebrate the business of God crippling God's self to enter the world as a human being. The point of entry for us as Christians is in remembering Jesus. Now there's a whole bunch of theological stuff that goes along with that. The Church early on develops ideas about Jesus that make Jesus a part of the godhead, another way of separating Jesus' experience from our experience because we can look at Jesus and say, "*Well, he was able to go through all of that because he was God. Oh yes, he was fully man but he was also fully God so Jesus could do that. I couldn't possibly do that. Jesus could speak truth to powers and principalities. I couldn't do that. Jesus could speak truth to the Church of his day. Oh, I couldn't do that. He was God; I'm not God.*" I don't buy it. I think the message of understanding who Jesus was and how Jesus lived has to do with our believing the incarnation is something that is as current as today and as close to us as the breath we draw.

This morning St. Peter's Square was really packed. The pope was already talking by the time my tv was turned on. There was a group of people in St. Peter's Square who were participating in a living nativity. He made the point of telling us that they were people who were physically disabled. They were there just like Mary and Joseph and people in Bible times who probably didn't look anything like the way we dress up when we do it. I have no idea. Who knows? But the point was clear that these people were taking seriously the roles played by the people back then two thousand years ago, participating in and witnessing to God being born in the person of Jesus. The thing that struck me was the pope didn't mock those people. The pope, like Joseph, respected them. He didn't make fun of them. The pope saw in everybody in that square the way I believe Jesus saw everybody that he knew in his life, as a potential place or locus for the incarnation of God Almighty - saw every human being as a possibility to be a container for God.

Now that's what Joseph saw in Mary - that she was pregnant. Who cares how? She was pregnant with the living presence of God Almighty in her being and, more importantly, in her body. Joseph was not going to write her off as a wayward woman, or possibly as a slut, or a teenager who made a mistake, or an outsider because she didn't have a man to give her value in that culture, or a breaker of divine law. Who knows? It might have been a married man. Joseph looked at her and respected her in her situation, cared for her, loved her and took responsibility for her - took responsibility *with* her because he respected her as a complete and entire human being, not just as a body part that he might grab, not just as a sub-stratum of society who shouldn't be paid as much as he was because she was also maybe a carpenter. Women can do that.

You see, what we prepare to celebrate in Christmas is that God cripples God's self to come into our world to live and to die as one of us so that we might be saved, so that we might be given a different perspective on the world - perhaps from all the other perspectives that are had - that we might look at everyone else, the world as a possible manger where the living God can be laid and be present in the world.

I regret that after the Reformation because of an over-emphasis on Mary and Mariology and Mariolotry in the Middle Ages, churches at the time of the Reformation did Mary in pretty badly. So among Lutherans you will look very hard to find a church named St. Mary's. But Mary remains for me, possibly even more than Jesus, a better example for Christians because we can still treat her as a human being rather than as a god, and maybe a human being as flawed as to have an illegitimate child or at least a child out of wedlock - pregnant out of wedlock for sure.

The Orthodox Church does a glorious thing with Mary. They do not see her as immaculately conceived. They regard her as a daughter of Adam which means they think that she's dirtied by all of that other sex stuff that we get messed up with. But because she says yes to God when God asks her the most ridiculous question in history: "*May I make you pregnant and live in you?*" she is the first among human beings to be assumed into the godhead because in the middle of her confounding and impossible situation she looks to heaven and says, "*Absolutely. Yes. Be it done to me according to your will.*" Skip the Church, skip society, skip the gossips. Your will be done, not mine. Now that's an example I can live with - a human being by nature sinful and unclean, caught in the circumstances of life, saying yes to God and being used by God to bring salvation into the world. Don't you think you can? You don't have to save the whole world. Try one relationship. Try treating those you know as the possible residence or at least an incubator of God Almighty here and now in this world. Believe what it is we will sing at Christmas: "*Be born in us today.*" All of that stuff gets lost when we reduce Christmas to an idiotic birthday party - on the wrong day anyway. Try and get two thousand and sixteen candles on a cake and then skip it for the rest of the year.

But we're talking about our belief as Christian people which enables us to look at others differently. One of the things that happens early in the life of Jesus is when Herod, an insane despotic ruler, is so jealous and scared that he orders the execution of all the baby boys because he's heard that a king is born in his kingdom. At that point Mary and Joseph and Jesus become exiles. They become immigrants. They go into Egypt without documentation. They leave their country. They are in a foreign land where they do not speak the language, where the culture, the clothing, the cuisine are different. They are completely alone there.

There are interesting Coptic icons of the flight into Egypt. They always depict the jackass Mary is riding on as smiling. I think it's because he is delighted for the burden that he's carrying. The fields of wheat are in full bloom and bearing grain. There's a tradition that when they passed through the countryside, they were pursued by Herod's murderous soldiers. The soldiers asked one of the local farmers whether or not he'd seen the Holy Family. The farmer didn't lie and said yes he had. The soldiers asked "*When?*" The farmer replied that he had seen them when he had planted the grain. That sounded as if he had seen them a long time ago, but the grain was in full bloom the day after it was planted.

In the icon the palm trees are depicted above them. The tradition is that they bent down so that the Holy Family could get the coconuts from the trees and be fed. They were illegal aliens escaping murderous intentions, and they represent for us God. It's worth taking time - and I'm glad we have a whole week between now and Christmas - as we contemplate the incarnation to understand that this story of Christmas is the challenge for us at all times in all places and for good reason because Joseph looked at a troubled woman and treated her with respect and as a person. The pope looked at disabled people and treated them as respected individuals who were a part, not only of the Christmas story, but of the incarnation.

Jesus appealed to us through his entire life to believe that all people everywhere are God's children and are to be treated by us as an opportunity to greet God in the flesh. It's a tough one, but it's easier to do when we believe that the incarnation is as individual as a person rather than when it's generalized and made into categories such as *them over there* and *us over here*. When we objectify women, then we talk about their body

parts, but we all know that doesn't work, even in the ghetto because when you talk about my mother, you're talking about somebody I know. When you talk about Mexicans, you need to know the man who came to me in the 1970s when I was deathly ill in that country and fed me and cared for me and looked after me. I don't even remember his name. I was cared for because I had need. That's all there was to it. He was a neighbor who lived in an apartment in the same building.

Do you get it? The incarnation is an invitation for us to have a personal relationship with God and to expect to find a personal relationship with God as a possibility in every last relationship we have with any and all other human beings in the world individually. So your smile is God's smile and so is the one that is returned to you. Your hands are God's hands and so are the ones that shake yours in return. Your heart is God's heart in this world for all people, especially for those who deserve God's love as much as you do. Aren't you wonderful! Get it?

And so we prepare to celebrate Christmas, the incarnation. And yes, it's going to be different for us than anything you see on television, anything you see in the mall, any bell you hear rung, any card you get, any junk you give or receive. This is going to be the substance of our lives, friends, because if we open the doors to our heart and dare to do what Mary did and say, "*Yes, in my miserable condition, enter me and be it done to me according to your will*" God will live in us and others will see God in us and the world will be a very, very different place. And that starts right here and right now.

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