

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
Christmas Day 25 December 2015

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 62:6-12 Titus 3:4-7 Luke 2:1-20

So now all the hoopla is over. Tomorrow Christmas is finished. Right? Well, in some ways of looking at it, that's true. You all know the song *The Twelve Days of Christmas*. Well, Christmas can be understood and *is* understood in the Church as a season that runs until the Epiphany when the Church recalls the arrival of the magi at the manger. It seems to me we have culturally and otherwise fashioned Christmas into a day, and one of the ideas about Christmas is that it's Jesus' birthday. My suspicion is, and there is some scholarly study about this, that Jesus probably wasn't born in December. Goodness knows, there wasn't any snow. Instead of snow they probably had sand. Instead of Christmas trees they probably had palm trees. So all of the things that trigger our nostalgia and our identifying Christmas with the birthday of Jesus are culturally conditioned and come to us from years and years of people receiving this message all over the world in different parts of the globe where it has become important for thousands of years now to pause to remember this Jewish boy who according to tradition was born in poverty, in filth (although kept clean by his parents), *in extremis* at the lowest rung of society without power of any kind, either political, social, racial.

Somehow the Church wakes up to the idea that this child, when he grows up, brings a message to the world which makes people believe that he's so special that they become willing, *we* become willing eventually to say, "*Ah, this wasn't just a baby. This was, in fact, God!*"

So we make a symbol of that a Christmas tree which is covered with 33 red roses and 33 white roses. It's a Tree of the Incarnation. You all know the hymn, "*There is no rose of such virtue as is the rose who bare Jesu.*" So the roses are suggestive of Mary. The red ones are suggestive of the human nature of Christ, and the white ones, the divine nature of Christ.

So the idea is not just to have a tree that brings light, and if there are candles warmth, into a cold and dark world, but a tree that reminds us of, not just the birthday of Jesus, but the Church's evolving theology of the incarnation - that in Jesus somehow God lives in that little sack of flesh and blood born to an unmarried, pregnant Jewish woman.

The Church gets so excited about trying to make Jesus so special, they said, "*Oh, she had a kid without having sex.*" Can you believe that? I'm not too excited about that. I surely believe that the natural process of copulation and impregnation and gestation and childbearing is a miracle and it is a deep mystery, a miraculous mystery that gets us all here so I don't need all of that stuff to make Jesus very special. The fact that we can accept a human being as God's gift is, and should be, enough for us.

But the Church became so excited about what Jesus said because he was seen by governments as seditious and he was seen by the religious institution as blasphemous because people gradually woke up to the fact that he spoke the truth. He had a perception about God as

the creator of the world, and it was different from the general ideas about God which sort out to be an angry old man in the sky who is sitting around waiting for you to mess up so he can punish you. It gives a bad reputation to testosterone for all of creation! *[laughter]*

Jesus buys the first page of the Bible very deeply, honestly and sincerely, and I believe Jesus understands God to be the happy creator of the world and all that is in the world and a God who is always pleased with whom and with what God has created. She did a better job - God - than we give her credit for. That doesn't mean we don't mess it up, but I don't think because we mess it up sometimes that God stoops so low as to become angry with us. Look at Jesus' life. Who was he angry with? Only those who said things about God which he knew were not true. He doesn't get very angry very often. He got ticked off at his mother, but I think they were doing an Anacin ad - "*Mother, please, I'd rather do it myself.*" *[laughter]* Wasn't that Anacin?

There is anger but as we recall the life of Jesus we see this man who is willing to speak to sinners, tax collectors who are real crooks, women who were completely devalued and probably menstruating when he talked to and touched them. Can you imagine?! All of these things that were taboo and forbidden Jesus saw in all of the people he lived with God's creation, God's *beloved* creation. He saw in all around him, and perhaps most especially those who upset him because you know when his own disciples get up his nose we hear things in scripture like, "*he looked at them and loved them.*" Sometimes when reason fails all you can do is love them. We've all been there sometime or another, haven't we?

He lives this extraordinary, simple, beautiful life and it upsets governments and churches so much that they execute him. Now long after the gospel traditions were written or at least some time after the gospel traditions were written - and they're not written down until fifty or a hundred years after Jesus is dead - the birth narratives, the stuff that we make Christmas out of, were added on later. This guy was so special something special had to have happened when he was born. That's how it works, you see. We get that and it seems to me we cheapen Christmas by making it into a birthday party, an annual celebration of the birthday of somebody who's been dead for two thousand years. If this is not a celebration of a God who lives with us here and now - and those are ideas that we're familiar with: "*O come, O come Emmanuel.*" How do we translate *Emmanuel* - God with us. Come, God, be with us. Come, God, live in us!

At every mass we celebrate here we come forward and we open our mouths and eat a little piece of bread and take a little sip of wine which are neither magic nor funny. They're just bread and wine which we set aside and say in this way, in this sacramental fashion, we hope to make in our behaviors our desire to allow God to live in us as we believe, teach and confess that God lived in Jesus. Now it seems to me the only way for God to be alive in the person of Jesus today is to be alive in the Body of Jesus today which we believe, teach and confess is the Church. We sing in the carol, "*Be born in us today.*" Now that doesn't mean that we merit that. It means that we believe that God can, in fact, use us as mysteriously and wonderfully as God got us here. God can employ us for God's purposes. God can live in us in our very flesh and blood. And we gather as a community so that we don't get off track with that in terms of our egos and set ourselves up as divine individuals rather than as individuals who constitute the divine and living Body of Christ in the world today.

We often get it wrong as the Church, don't we, because we say that means that *you* have to worship my idea about God. Well, my idea about God is an idol, isn't it, essentially, if I'm not worshipping God. "*You have to sign on the same dotted line that I signed on or you're going to hell because I can send you there. I know and believe that I'm right.*" That always makes me pause to think that if you can be that sure that you're right, you have a very small God and your God did an awfully poor job in creating this world in terms of all of those other people who don't agree with you and me.

And so it is at Christmas we come to a manger and in all of these Christmas stories there's a lot of looking. The angel appeared to Mary before Jesus was born and what does Mary say? "*Behold...Ecce ancilla Domini...Behold the handmaiden of the Lord. Look at me. I'm not important. I'm poor, I'm pregnant, I'm not married. Look at me. God intends to use me.*"

In the gospel this morning the angel says, "*Do not be afraid for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people.*" Mary and Joseph and the child were found - *seen* - lying in a manger. And one of the great traditional hymns in Latin for Christmas morning matin is *O Magnum Mysterium*. How's your Latin? It can't be any worse than mine. You will hear this sung as you listen to Christmas music on the radio. I'll give you the Latin words because they're fun to say:

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
jacentem in praesepe!
Beata Virgo, cujus viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Christum.
Alleluia!*

Here's the translation:

*O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the new-born Lord,
lying in a manger!
Blessed is the Virgin whose womb
was worthy to bear
Christ the Lord.
Alleluia!*

I think that means not just cattle and sheep but every other jackass in creation should be able to see in the person of any child of any status born anywhere in the world the mystery of the true and living God. That the animals should see the new-born Lord lying in a feed trough. O Great Mystery!

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