

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller
Christmas Day
25 December 2014

Scripture readings:

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalms 97

Titus 3:4-7

John 1:1-14

Last night I told the people that I began Christmas Eve in the bathroom. Before I got to the kitchen to make morning coffee, I started by sanitizing the toilet and the bathroom floor. I had intended to do that a day or two before. All of the chemicals and necessary equipment were there but you know about holiday rush and all the rest of it. I thought, "*Here it is Christmas Eve and I'm cleaning a toilet. How inappropriate is this?*" Then I thought again and I thought, "*Christmas is all about God cleaning a toilet.*"

You know, the birth narratives, the story about Jesus being born in Bethlehem in a barn are probably the shakiest actual pieces of scripture that exist. We do know, biblical scholars know that the birth narratives were added way late in biblical literature, way, way afterwards when people were starting to formulate ideas about who Jesus was and what he said. And they started to come up with this idea that he was really very important and developed this concept that he might be God. At that time and in those places in order to be that important your birth had to be accompanied with signs in the heavens and heavenly messengers and all the rest of it - even strange visitors from foreign countries. And so the things that seem the most attractive to most people at the time of the shortest days of the year are really pretty shaky in terms of how we understand fact. But they endure and I suppose they endure for a reason. I mean you know if churches don't make it at Christmas they're not going to make it the rest of the year. It's when houses are packed and offering plates are overflowing because people like this story. My question is: Is it worth reviewing this story to see what else there might be in it apart from the fact that everybody does it. Everybody pays attention to it. Is there something in here that speaks to us in the midst of our lives today?

I don't think it's accidental that those who created the myth of a birth in a barn - I don't think it's accidental but I think that's a theological truth. Do you know what a barn floor looks like? And do you know what is there? I recall being in a barn down in Lancaster County. Over every stall was a wire with a piece of metal hanging on it and it was obviously electrified. I said, "*What are those for?*" and they said, "*Well, cattle arch their backs when they eliminate, and that's to shock them so they put it in the right place to help keep the barn floor clean.*"

So theologically we get this concept that God comes into the world in a pretty filthy place in terms of the birth of Jesus if we're going to make the equation that Jesus is, in fact, God.

Then Jesus is laid in a manger. Any Italians? When it's time to eat, what do we say? *Mangiare*, the same word. And in some Italian Renaissance art the manger and the whole nativity takes place in ruins. There are fallen-down buildings and cattle all around. And in some of them the manger is an old sarcophagus which is being used as a trough. You know what a sarcophagus is, don't you? It's where you put dead bodies. You know what that word means in Greek. *Sarcs* is flesh and everybody has an *esophagus* here. A sarcophagus is a flesh eater. So here in a sarcophagus, not just because the painter thought that was a pretty thing to paint - this has significance. The savior of the world, according to the theology of the Church, is laid in a flesh eater where animals take their sustenance.

Now Rita will know, German speaker that she is, the Germans have two words for eating. One is *essen* which means to eat and one is *fressen* which means animals feeding. There's a distinct difference in German between the way animals eat and the way humans eat. And if you really want to insult somebody in German,

you accuse them of *fressen* at the table, eating like an animal.

So those who constructed these early traditions about the birth of Jesus have constructed an extraordinary scenario which we clean up, play dolls with. What does your manger scene smell like at home? Maybe a little clean straw.

One of the many reasons I like this pope is because he has suggested that shepherds should, in fact, smell like their sheep. The reason he says that, I believe, is that if those who are caring for the animals don't smell like them they're not doing a very good job.

So here we have this extraordinary theological proclamation that in the person of this little Jewish boy two thousand years ago God comes into the world at its lowest point. Fulton Sheen, in his book *A Life of Christ*, talks about Jesus being born in a cave, *under* the earth, you see. And if you look at Orthodox icons of nativities you'll see that the Eastern Church understands that the birth takes place in a cave. The cave also appears at the bottom of the foot of the cross in Orthodox iconography. The point being made that there is no place in this creation that is beyond the reach of God and outside of the ability for God to reach.

But we really like to dress it up. We get out the Johnson and Johnson baby powder Christmases and we do, I think, frankly damnable things like images of Santa Claus kneeling at the manger. And we forget that in Christmas we are celebrating our belief that God comes to clean up the toilet we have made out of the Garden of Eden.

"In the beginning," we read in the text of the Gospel today, *"was the Word."* Well, that's not the first time that *"In the beginning"* is used in scripture. Can you recall another time? Page one? *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth and all that's in them, and everything that God created God looks at, is pleased with and loves."* Somewhere along the line we mess that up. Somewhere along the line we fail to believe that. Somewhere along the line we confuse ourselves with God because we are poor spellers. We see ourselves as gods rather than as God's. And in our sinfulness we take this extraordinarily beautiful garden and turn it into a toilet.

Now that's the human condition and if that's where the story ends, we are, frankly, up a creek, friends. There is no hope. But Jesus shares a message that is so profoundly extraordinary that those who hear the message work very, very hard throughout history to say that this guy was not only the bearer of an extraordinary message; in fact he was the message itself. So we get this text in John today, this theological Gospel, that says, *"In the beginning was the Word and the Word became flesh and lived among us."* It's talking about Jesus as the godhead being at the beginning of creation when creation was made. That's the kind of stuff Greek philosophers do. I'm not sure I'm good at that, but what I *am* good at is realizing that two thousand years later we still pause and come out on a ridiculous morning at ten o'clock when everybody else is in bed to remember that God desires to retrieve God's creation for God's own self. And we believe, teach and confess that one of the ways that God does that is through the message that Jesus brings which is that no matter how bad it has been, no matter where you think you are, no matter how far beyond the reach of God, God has been there before you and is waiting for you simply to turn around.

The business of sharing gifts at Christmas I suppose has a noble history, but I find most of it revolting rather than noble because it always involve a gift *exchange*, and we live in mortal fear, don't we, that we would go somewhere where somebody would give us something and we wouldn't have anything to offer in return. Well, get over it because I believe that Christmas is God's proclamation to us that there is nothing that we can give to God, nothing except the integrity of saying we are broken. We are by nature sinful and unclean. We

cannot save ourselves and we believe that God can. And in Christmas we say that God does that through Jesus somehow.

You know Benjamin Britten's *Ceremony of Carols*, don't you? Does nothing to put Johnson and Johnson's baby powder on that baby. Medieval theology, here we go: "*This little babe so few days old has come to rifle Satan's fold.*" This baby is not here to be rockabyed. This baby comes to close down hell! This baby comes to kill the devil. This baby comes to remind you and me and the rest of the world that God is our creator and we are eternally loved by that God whether or not we bother to believe that at the moment, and no matter what our behaviors, God's behavior toward us will not change. And that means that God loves me and you and every last Muslim, atheist, Jew, Roman Catholic - even, I think, Methodists. You think? Forever! Even though we don't act as the loved and certainly don't act as the lovely. But our celebration of Christmas is that God's love simply does not go away and that God's love never is far away.

So that in Christmas we celebrate two theological realities. One is the nativity of Jesus which is really very, very shaky stuff. We can agree that Jesus was born. We can agree that Jesus was a Jew and that Jesus suffered as does everyone else in the world and maybe even a little more. On the eighth day he's circumcised, he's mutilated, bleeds, cries, screams, has a very rough relationship with his mother. We like to clean that one up a little bit - they didn't get along very well. And she, if you listen to the angel at the annunciation, she's warned that this is not going to be an easy motherhood. "*A sword will pierce your heart.*" And despite Mary's willingness to say, "*Yes. Be it done to me according to God's will,*" it doesn't mean she gets a Mary Kay Cadillac for that. It means she faces a life of coming to understand, not understanding, of coming to belief, not instantaneous belief, of struggling with her son and who he is and what it is he expects of himself and the world in terms of loving God and therefore loving each other.

And so back to the business of exchanging gifts. Jesus teaches us that all we can do is accept God's gift and the only way we can accept God's gift is by offering a broken and a contrite heart, by not pretending that we are God but pretending that we are God's and that we need God's salvation for our own benefit.

The second lesson today about Grace is extraordinary in that it teaches us that God gives this gift to us who need it. There is no exchange. There are reasons I like Martin Luther. He understood about God being present with one in the outhouse. He understood that the proof of Jesus' humanity was found in the dirt in his diapers. And he understood this business about Grace - that all of my good works is worth a bag of dirty rags compared to God's Grace. That God is not gracious to us because we earn it, deserve it, because we're loveable or we're better than anybody else. God is as good to us as God is to everyone else in the world and intends to be because God creates us all. And if our Christianity means anything to us it should mean that we who believe that we are not worthy accept this gift without exchange and therefore cannot keep it to ourselves and share it, not in a contractual way with those we think deserve it, but with those who need it which may be people we don't like. Merry Christmas! Do you have a gift to receive from God? Can the world expect one from us? And then after the toilet is sanitized maybe we'll get a better view of Eden.

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