

St. John's Episcopal Church  
Hamlin, Pennsylvania  
The Rev'd Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.  
The Second Sunday After Christmas  
03 January 2016

Scripture readings:

Jeremiah 31:7-14      Psalm 84      Ephesians 1:3-6, 15-19a      Matthew 2:13-15, 19-23

We've just sung the last stanza of a hymn that was referential to Palm Sunday. That seems awfully inappropriate on the second Sunday after Christmas. But you may recall in the old calendars the Gospel lesson for the first Sunday in Advent was the Palm Sunday story. Why was that? Well, because Advent is the season when we contemplate the *coming* of Jesus. The coming of emperors in ancient times was always accompanied with great parades and acclamation and flowers strewn in the way, etc., etc., and in Christmas we celebrate the arrival of our king Jesus. But it's dumb, isn't it, because the arrival of Jesus isn't much like the arrival of an emperor. It starts to stink like that a little bit in Palm Sunday in a mocking sort of way, and it's felt that Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday was to send up the emperor so it was really a very, very dangerous and politically seditious act to march into Jerusalem the way the emperor did - on his way to being crucified.

And it's a silly time of year because you know in the Church Calendar after Christmas Day there are three days that seem incongruous to the whole thing. The day after Christmas, St. Stephen's Day, is the day we remember the first Christian martyr, St. Stephen, who gave his life for what he believed about who Jesus was. In that event of the stoning of Stephen there was a man there who held the coats of other people, a man named Saul whom some believe eventually became St. Paul.

Then the 27<sup>th</sup>, two days after Christmas, the Church Calendar invites us to remember the Day of St. John which is sort of nice for a place like this which calls itself St. John every day of the year. St. John the Apostle. There were so many St. Johns they all get confused and conflated anyway. The thought is that St. John would have been a martyr if it had been asked of him but it wasn't asked of him so he died a natural death. So he would have been a martyr but he wasn't.

So we have in St. Stephen a martyr in deed and a martyr in will. We have in St. John a martyr in will but not in deed. Then we get to the 28<sup>th</sup> and we remember all those baby boys who were slaughtered by Herod in his insane rage to find and assassinate the infant Jesus. They are commemorated as martyrs in deed but not in will. They were all killed before the age of cognition of choice. That was last week.

On the 1<sup>st</sup> of January, two days ago, we commemorate the circumcision of Jesus because good Jews circumcised their male babies eight days after birth. Circumcision comes and goes in fashion in hospitals. "*When so-and-so was born they did that, and now they've stopped that.*" There are movements in Judaism by some to stop circumcision as a religious practice. It's practiced among Jews and Muslims and others around the world. Think of it what you will, it is a mutilation. It hurts, babies cry, and there's blood involved.

So right after Christmas, right after celebrating the birthday - and birth-giving in itself is pretty much a bloody mess - we have the blood of martyrs, the blood of adults, the blood of children, the blood of cultic mutilating behaviors. By the way, my thought about circumcision is that out of ancient, ancient practice, long before we know much about anything in history, circumcision was probably a substitute for the sacrifice of the firstborn male. So instead of "*Let's not kill this baby. Let's just mess him up a little bit and get a little blood.*" I don't know. It's just my guess. It's a whole lot better than the sacrifice of the firstborn male which was done in ancient cultures the world around.

And then today we bang up against this story of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to escape the slaughter of the holy innocent martyrs, and off they go because they were warned by an angel - now get this - without passports, without papers, without permission, in flight, refugees.

Have you ever been to Egypt? James and I went some years ago, and I was astounded. We were on a Mediterranean Cruise. We got off in Alexandria and we took the bus to go to the pyramids in Giza. I suppose it's never really safe there, but it was safe enough for us to go but so unsafe that in the caravan of buses in which we traveled there was an armed guard at the beginning, an armed guard at the end, and an armed guard on each bus. We were told, "*Do whatever you need to do now because when these buses leave we will stop for nothing!*" Well let me tell you, there was nothing to stop for. [laughter] Between those two points of arrival and the point of the pyramids there was absolutely nothing but sand, sand and more sand. [laughter]

I heard a golfer's joke not long ago. The golfer was taken to Egypt and they said, "*Do you know what this is?*" and he said, "*Yeah, but where's the green?*" [laughter] Sand trap.

There is in Orthodox iconography, particularly Coptic Christian iconography...Here is the Coptic icon of the Flight into Egypt. This was painted by a Coptic Egyptian man whom I met when I was doing my Ph.D. at Drew University. It tells the story in a fascinating and beautiful way. Here is the Holy Family and there is Joseph walking and Mary riding holding the baby. In Egyptian iconography the heads seem larger than usual. That's their way of saying that these are holy people. It doesn't work that way in our society, does it? When you have a big head you're probably *not* holy.

They're walking through a field of grain that has grown up. The legend there is that when the Holy Family passed a field that was being planted, it grew up fully mature overnight. They were pursued by soldiers who were looking for them. They asked the farmer, "*When did you see these people go by?*" And he said, "*Oh, when the field was first planted.*" [laughter] So they turned back.

Then Mary became overheated and thirsty. Palm trees were there that shaded them, but they couldn't reach the coconuts so Jesus commanded them to come down and the palm trees bent down. In some depictions angels bent the branches of the palm trees down so they could have something to eat. The other legend is that from the roots of the palm trees sprung forth springs and streams of water. If you get a chance to look at this closely you will see the stream is not only filled with water; it's filled with very happy fish.

But the thing that intrigues me most about this is the beast of burden. This is a happy jackass! [laughter] He is delighted and smiling to be carrying on his back the savior of the world and his mother. And delighted to be taking them to the safety of a foreign land. There aren't many stories about how they were cared for in Egypt - at least not in scripture. There is one story that one of the caves they wanted to hole up in was occupied by a dragon who made them very unwelcome there.

But it's worth our while as we continue to celebrate Christmas - because Christmas isn't over, at least in the life of the Church. It's a season. Even in the life of the department story we sing, "*On the 12<sup>th</sup> day of Christmas.*" That'll take us to the 6<sup>th</sup> of January which for some in the Orthodox tradition *is* Christmas. For us it'll be the time when we commemorate the arrival of other undocumented citizens from another country who came to worship the baby in Bethlehem, the Magi.

It is worth our while as we celebrate Christmas to imagine something other than the birthday of a 2,015 year old Jew. If Christmas for us is simply a birthday party for Jesus, then it's over. You've had it and, by the way, you probably celebrated it on the wrong day because this year there are 365 alternative options of days on which he might have been born because nobody knows when that was. There certainly was no snow, and he wasn't blond!

So if what we're celebrating is the truth that these traditions convey for us, the truth that somehow in the person of Jesus we come to believe that God chooses to live in the world in this day in flesh, then we have a little bit more to chew on, celebrate, think about, and theologize about for the rest of our year and lives, if you will. What does it mean for us to believe, teach and celebrate Emmanuel, God with us? What does it mean for us to sing the Christmas carol, "*Be born in us today.*" That's tough stuff. And let's see what the tradition says about it. The tradition says that if you're going to buy the idea that in the person of Jesus God is somehow born, let's examine his first days on this earth as an undocumented alien fleeing the

dangers of his own home for protection in a pretty unwelcoming other country without political protection, without documentation, depending upon the kindness of strangers and foreigners to understand that their being there against all the regulation was a life saving move for them to which they were called from heaven by an angel. Then I think we can start to understand what incarnation might mean in our world today.

It's not a Christian idea that the treatment of geeks, gooks, foreigners, undocumented aliens, people without passports, strangers, people of different colors, languages, cultures, people who dress differently and eat differently - it's not a Christian idea that the foreigner among us should be treated well. It's a *pre-Christian* idea that you treat those you do not know and who come to you, however accidentally and for whatever reason, be treated well because in doing so you might be looking after an angel in that person without knowing it. Who in Egypt knew who the baby in Mary's arms was or was to become?

You all remember Dale Evans, don't you? Do you remember her little book: *Angels Unaware?* There is a message in this story, in this myth, in this tradition, in this Christmas for us - not only in terms of what we remember about the birth of a Jew 2,015 years ago, but in terms of how we live our lives here in this world and today. Because there are those who come to us on happy jackasses without papers, without argument, without plea seeking safety, warmth, food, clothing, affection, care, protection. And the question is will we see those strangers in our midst as divine visitors or not. "*Well, you know, pastor, we live in a very dangerous world.*" We do. "*And you never know,*" and you don't. So what about that?

I had a house guest over the weekend from South Jersey who showed me an e-mail that was sent to her from a family member, and it was an impassioned and very, very sense-making plea to the world about understanding Muslims in our midst. It was written allegedly by a pilot whom I assume was a man. His worry was the rational kind of worry we all have about people who are a different color, who dress differently and eat differently, and they worried him. His quotient of caution was raised. And I got it, I get it, I know. I didn't read the whole thing. It was way too long for my attention span. But I did read the first part, and my problem with his argument came in about the first paragraph. And this was the problem: he was speaking as an American who dearly loves his country, and he was speaking as, I assume, a white man who thought he owned and had a right to America.

He took into his consideration absolutely nothing about the indigenous American people, about their language, their culture, their cuisine, their couture. He acted as if his ancestors, who stole this place from them, *owned* it. He had no ability to understanding himself as the heir of a social, cultural, political, religious problem. So because he started completely right, his argument made more sense because everybody else was completely wrong, and he couldn't understand why anybody in the world couldn't like us. And empires do that, don't we, because we can push and overrun and purchase and equip. You must remember that most of the weapons that are pointed at us come from us, manufactured and so on. We lose perspective and in losing perspective we lose humility in terms of the world, and we lose the willingness, it seems to me, to faithfully take responsibility for being the sinners we confess ourselves to be at every mass, who are by nature sinful and unclean and are imperfect as we interact in the world in which we live.

But we gather to celebrate Christmas because in Christmas for us there is hope, not fear. There's a difference. And hope suggests that in the person of Jesus somehow an early group of persecuted people perceived that loving the geek, the gook, the foreigner, the outsider, the woman, the sinner, the slut, the whore, the tax collector, the cheat, the thief, and, yes, the addicted - you know, all of the people we have treated poorly as society and culture - the slave. In treating those people as Jesus did, as beloved brothers and sisters, something happens. A world view is changed and the believer becomes a humble participant in society who starts, not with a framework of "*This is mine, I own it, I was born here, I belong here, to hell with the rest of you*" but "*I am an imperfect piece of an imperfect society and it has not all been right. I have not inherited in any way a rectitude or a divinity which allows me to believe that anybody else in the world is somewhat lower in the estimation of the Almighty than I am.*"

And so the pilot failed, for me, in all of his good reasoning - and there was lovely reasoning there,

but it was a bad premise. He failed for me because he didn't see himself as a steward, as a visitor, as a guest, as a humble person who inherited an imperfect heritage, who could have thought perhaps that he could make the world better by asking people to help him understand them at the same time he asked them to understand him.

Now Jesus didn't have that problem. When he spoke to the woman at the well, when he visited with the tax collectors, when he made the gutter slut his good friend, when he treated other people as if they were like him, children of God, they perceived in him hope for the world. And that hope was so real and so palpable that they have come and we have come to call him God, that the message he brought was so divine that we have trouble separating the messenger from the message. You know we always say, "*Don't shoot the messenger.*" Well, there are those among us who say, "*Don't worship the messenger.*" Well, I don't care. I think God is big enough to worry about that. But my desire is that we not miss the message.

On the south portal of the great cathedral at Strasbourg - you know Strasbourg is on the border between France and Germany. Sometimes it's German and sometimes it's French. Well, it produces the world's greatest cuisine - mountains of sauerkraut piled high with meat, sausage and all the rest of it! Well, there it is - Strasbourg, and in the middle of all of that charcuterie rises this gorgeous red stone cathedral - ancient. It was one of the first cathedrals where Protestant worship services were celebrated at the time of the Reformation. The Strasbourg Cathedral has this sort of double facade. There's the solid cathedral and then there's a sort of lace business done in stone outside. It's a really beautiful place.

On the south portal are two huge sculptures of women. One of them is blindfolded. It's the depiction of the synagogue, the church that's blind to Jesus. They can't see the savior the way we can. The other is a large statue of a naked woman fully covered with her long curly red hair - the Magdalene. Two women who stand outside of this great Christian building welcoming the rest of us in who are often blind to the love of God and who are often naked before God in our humanity. And here they are, reminders to us, invitations to us to enter that great church and see and believe the Lord that they have encountered since, to be changed so much by the encounter with this illegal, undocumented infant alien in a foreign land, so much so that the Magdalene came to be called in the early Church the 13<sup>th</sup> apostle - bare-naked, red-headed woman that she was!

The power of a foreigner to bring to a desert palm trees that bloom and are filled with fruit, water that's filled with fish - not always a taker but a giver. And the invitation for us to purchase Christmas as a year-long theological reality rather than to celebrate it as one birthday for somebody who died over 2,000 years ago. Christmas, it seems to me, is an invitation to a style of life, and that style of life suggests to me that we become ourselves in this world here and now today as the Church corporately and individually - we become the manger in which the savior is laid in the world. The manger, as you know, gets its name from *mangia*. What does that mean in Italian? Eat! So a manger is a place where animals eat. That we become the place where the laughing jackasses of the world find food. And the food they find lying in us is a living God who loves all of that creation that that living God made, every last lousy sinner in it - meaning *me*. And if God can love me, dear friends, there's nobody here outside the pale. That's what it seems to me the pilot in his tirade on the internet lacked - the humility to believe that he was saved rather than that he had to *be* the savior, that he was loved rather than it was the world's job to prove to him that they deserved *his* love, that he was God's rather than god.

And so we come to the altar now so that we might each of us be a manger, that we might each of us take the body and blood of the savior into our guts so that wherever we may go a world of laughing jackasses when it encounters us will see God alive in us in the way and manner that we treat them, with or without documents, with or without passports, but coming with their need which we can address if with nothing else than the loving smile of a God-bearing jackass.

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