

St. John's Episcopal Church
Hamlin, Pennsylvania
The Rev'd. Ronald Royce Miller, Ph.D.
The First Sunday After Christmas
31 December 2017

Scripture readings:

Genesis 3:1-15 Isaiah 7:10-15 Luke 1:5-25 Luke 2:21-36 John 1:1-18

I spent a certain amount of energy during the Advent season asking us as a church if we don't observe Advent, who will? I feel as if I've spent a certain amount of energy trying to, to some degree or another, debunk the birth narratives, or at least to put them in their place, to understand that in the scriptures we receive all of this hoopla about the birth of Jesus which was probably added way late to the kerygma, to the proclamation of the Church, in an attempt to prove how special Jesus was. And that's ok. It's not telling lies. It's trying to emphasize the truth with myth and with legend. But it is a mistake to equate the legend with historic fact. And it is an even bigger mistake to take the legend and the myth and ignore the truth that is intended to be conveyed by them.

As we were reading these texts and I was sitting up here, it occurred to me that probably the one thing that is factual in these birth narratives that we've been reading is that on the 8th day that child was mutilated, circumcised. That hurts and it bleeds.

It was about 1978, I believe, when the Lutheran Church in America in its new calendar did what other churches have since done: changed the naming of the day of the first of January from The Circumcision and Name of Jesus to simply The Name of Jesus. Not a big deal, right? For those who study things like that, the Gospel for the first of January is the shortest one in the year. Now I suppose there's wisdom in that, but it's one verse: "*They took the child, circumcised him and called his name Jesus.*" And we as Christians had to circumcise that and cut it in half in our commemorations from beyond the middle of the 20th century, a celebration that had been there from the 4th century, and I have to ask *Why?*

Not too many weeks ago I wrote to the editor of The Pastor's Pocket Calendar which I carry, printed by Augsburg Fortress Press - because when I got my new one I realized that what used to be there, wasn't anymore. I was caught up short this year in knowing when Hanukkah and Passover were because they have been deleted from The Pastor's Pocket Calendar. Are you getting the picture? We must be careful about institutionalized racisms and prejudices, no matter how pious they seem. And the pitiful answer I got to that was, "*Let the people use their computers to find out when the Jewish holidays are.*"

Circumcision is important to Jews. I have a suspicion about circumcision, as grotesque a practice as it may seem to us, it was probably in the longer perspective, a better thing to do than to sacrifice your first-born male. So instead of killing your child, you just clip his penis. Seems like a reasonable alternative.

When I was teaching a course at Fairleigh Dickinson on cross-cultural perspectives, I remember the outrage at some African practices of circumcising females, but I also remember seeing a film of a very, very well-known African author saying, "*Well, you have no trouble with circumcising males.*" Well, that's a discussion for another time. But the point I want to make about circumcision is that that's probably the one fact in the birth narratives that is actual fact, and it means that we have in Jesus - no matter what you believe about him - a real live human being who lives, breathes, dumps in his diaper, bleeds when he's cut, screams when he's hurt, feeds at his mother's breast, and lives and dies as a human being.

I don't care if you believe anything else than that about Jesus - I really don't. I *do* care that you hear what he said. Whether or not you believe he's God or God's son or specially related to God ... my question is, "*Are you?*" I care that you listen to what he said.

Now for wisdom that is larger than my own, when we read the John text, "*In the beginning was the Word,*" that's the third time that's been read in a row in this sanctuary in the last three masses. Last Sunday it was the Gospel, this Sunday it's the Gospel, and now you just had it again. Why is that text so important at this time of year?

Listen to me, friends. There is a popular mistake that will tell you. You've said it yourselves and so have

I. in reference to the Bible, that the Bible is the Word of God. That's why this text from John is important. The text from John does not say that a biblical text is God Incarnate. It does not say that words are the Word of God. It does not say that a canonized scripture is the Word of God. And if you want to know what that conversion leads to, look at the Religious Right in this country, because they will tell you that is the Word of God.

John's Gospel tells us that Jesus is God's *logos* - that's the Greek word - the Word of God become flesh. And I don't care whether or not you believe Jesus is God. I care that you listen to what Jesus said about God and about God's creation. And that means every other rotten louse in this world, including you - everyone!

By the way, the pope this morning was focused on the Christian family. That makes sense at this time of year. Rockaby Baby Jesus, mother, father - Oh, was he the father? Did they have sex? Oh well...[laughter] If they didn't have sex, can you be God's children? Because your parents did. No fooling!

But that young family early on had to get out of Dodge. They had to hail the next donkey, and they had to flee a dangerous politic, an unfriendly society, threats to their lives, and an intolerant neighborhood. And they went to Egypt. This morning the pope remembered and spoke about the Coptic Christians, the oldest living liturgical tradition in the world. And it is to Egypt where Jesus and Mary and Joseph went and encountered a wall built by an idiot...No...[laughter] They found a welcome for them as strangers, immigrants, as people who were in danger, who needed to be fed and housed and clothed because you can't get all that garbage on a donkey. But they needed first and foremost safety, and I don't care what anybody who stands on scripture tells you about geeks and gooks and foreigners and "them" and Mexicans and all the rest of it, that is Jesus coming here looking for asylum. It's that simple.

I don't care if you make Jesus into God. In fact that's probably a dangerous thing to do. I *do* care that you make him into a prophet who has an extraordinary relationship with God which makes his relationships with other people absolutely radical, ridiculous, dangerous, and true.

The scripture in talking about the forerunner - John the Baptizer - says he was not the light. Jesus was the light. There is an understanding from the very early Church that those who spoke the truth - and John spoke the truth - that Jesus spoke an extraordinary truth which you, dear friends, are yourselves invited to speak to each other and to the world. And that's why we call ourselves the Body of Christ, and that's why I'm highly invested at Christmas in keeping Jesus a real live Jewish boy - because he did celebrate Passover, and my Christian calendar won't tell me when it is. He did have a penis and it was circumcised. He was nailed to a cross. He screamed, he bled, and it wasn't because God killed him or Jews killed him or anybody killed him but ignorance and intolerance and fear - fear of the other, fear of truth, refusal to speak the truth, refusal to speak the truth in love and refusal to love one's enemies as one's self. That's what kills Jesus every day. And that's why today, more than ever, our job becomes really, really important - to mean what we say when we sing, "*Be born in us today*" because Jesus was never very welcome here, and he certainly isn't now - particularly in the seats of power. But that's not an excuse for us to shut him up or to keep him from bleeding or from sharing his love for us and for all people in our lives individually and corporately. Be born in us today! Amen.