

2nd Sunday of Christmas

Sermon 1.4.15

Scripture: Jeremiah 31:7-14

John 1:1-18

I love Christmas. I know not everyone does. I know for some it's annoying, for others it's depressing. People who are lonely or have suffered recent loss or heartbreak, I know, might find all the merrymaking around them grindingly painful. But even when I suffered heartbreak near Christmas—my dad left the Sunday after Thanksgiving in 1993 when I was 23—I still loved Christmas. It was, that year, a weird version of itself, the merriment taking on a numbing quality—my mom and me huddled together in a world that seemed suddenly unstable. But I still enjoyed it, and this year Mom and I remembered it with a strange fondness. After all, we'd made it through that together.

I tell you this because the Incarnation isn't a tough one for me. It isn't a tough-to-take assertion of our faith—that God would desire to become flesh and to live among us. Historically, it's been a tough sell. I surveyed this in the sermon last week. All sorts of people the world over have indeed been confused, even scandalized, by this notion—that the Word became Flesh and lived among us. Really, in most god-centered religious formulations, one of the advantages of being a god is *not* having a body—and so not having to cope with consequence and face decision, not having to bump up against reality's hard edges and sharp corners.

Cynthia Bourgeault outlines it all pretty well: “Life presents us with a series of seemingly irrevocable choices,” she writes, “To do one thing means that we have to give up something else; to marry one person means we can't marry another; and to join a monastery means we can't marry at all. Our confused agendas clash both inwardly and outwardly, and we cause each other pain. Our bodies age; we diminish physically; loved ones fall out of our lives. And the force of gravity is tenacious, nailing our feet to the ground and usually our souls as well...” True enough, all of this. And so, given all this state of things, any god who'd stay above and out of it all—on Olympus or Asgard or in the Fortress of Solitude—is a pretty smart god.

I have a friend who got herself into very big trouble because of envy and this bounded world in which she finds herself bound indeed. She had access to a checkbook that wasn't hers, tied to an account full of money that was more than she had; and she was surrounded by friends and a small-town society that made it appear as if everyone had more than she did—a lot more.

“Let's go out to dinner after the meeting,” committee members say casually, as if everyone has \$50 to drop on a spontaneous night out.

“I love your sweater,” “Thanks. I love your earrings. Are they new?” women say to one another, the way dogs sniff out one another to figure out if this will be a pleasant encounter, or an aggressive one. But what of the one who's wearing the same sweater as last week, or has no new earrings?

I feel for her. Since the story broke, since she herself broke, I have felt for her because I know what that feels like. I know the visceral, felt experience of crippling envy. Mine doesn't gather steam around money; it does around physical appearance. Funny as it sounds, if there were a way I could have mugged Winona Ryder and made off with her figure, leaving her fizzled on the sidewalk, I would have. In high school, in college, how I wanted to be small! It was a gnawing pain in my gut: how I hated my body. But I couldn't get out of it, and I lacked the discipline that an eating disorder requires (thank God). It's my body: I'm stuck with it.

So, I get it. I get it on a religious, historical, grand level: that God would desire to take on this fleshly existence—bizarre! absurd! scandalous! And I get it on a deeply personal level: that God would take on the human form and move among us in this sharp, edgy, limited and limiting world—what? why? Why would God do that?

As it happens, the conversation one Monday morning came around to the question of what fleshly life has to offer. It was a while ago, so I can't remember the particulars of what brought us to this question. As I recall, though, the underlying assumption was that the life of the spirit was much to be preferred. Of course, we've got a bunch of intellectuals in the group. We like to sit and think, pray and talk—and other than the fact that you need a butt to sit and a brain to think and mouth to talk, it's obvious that we would be enamored of the spiritual life perhaps to the exclusion of the embodied life.

But, oppositional person that I am (I'm eager-to-please on the surface, but there is a very stubborn little animal dwelling deeper down inside me), I got to thinking, what in life do I love, or have I loved, that would not be mine to experience were it not for the body?

Name five.

Quickly.

Nursing my children.

Choral singing.

Rowing in a women's eight.

Marital relations. (I got to that late because I was embarrassed, but there it is.)
Really, marriage at all.

Ministry.

After worship this morning I'm heading to the home of an older couple I know. Their son died on Thanksgiving and they're beside themselves with grief. This is the fourth family I've had to visit in the circumstance of having suddenly a son to death. I'm not looking forward to it; I never do; and yet I am—just like I look forward to chipping away at our society's racism, and my own racism; just like I look forward to transforming environmental degradation caused by human society into new and creative ways of being in the world; just like I look forward to easing the stresses on the poor the world over as we are called to do by the gospel; just like I look forward to tomorrow morning, gathering once again with our Monday morning regulars, following the hurdles of the holiday season which had us scattered in focus and in location, to sit and think and pray and discuss the mysteries and revelations of our shared faith.

We would not need ministry were it not for the material world. This is essentially Cynthia Bourgeault's point when she explains why God would choose Incarnation: "Could it be," she wonders, "that this earthly realm, not in spite of but *because of* its very density and jagged edges, offers precisely the conditions for the expression of certain aspects of divine love that could become real in no other way? ...These mature and subtle flavors of love have no real context in a realm where there

are no edges and boundaries, where all just flows [—that which is the realm of the eternal, the realized realm of God]. But when you run up against the hard edge, [stuck between a rock and a hard place, and you’re called to be faithful to what’s true, to what’s good], what emerges is a most precious taste of pure divine love...”

In sum, God who is love chose Incarnation because here, where we live, is the only realm where a most divine love can most strongly be expressed.

Did you notice the call to worship is all one sentence?

Maybe you thought it was another of my typos—the fact that the rhetoric was nearly unmanageable, the fact that maybe you lost your breath as you were trying to get all those words out. Maybe you thought I just didn’t plan all that well—like when, on Palm Sunday years ago, the new minister at my home church had a lay reader offer up the suggested lectionary reading of Mark, chapters 14 and 15, which amounted to 15 minutes of mumbling from the pulpit. (“Whoops,” was his hindsight evaluation. “I’ll never do that again.”) I mean, aren’t calls to worship supposed to be easy and spirited? Aren’t they supposed to rally the base before getting into the serious substance of it all? “Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all you people! Come into his presence with singing and his courts with praise.” Isn’t that more like it?

Maybe for some congregations: maybe for most. But you, my friends, aren’t “most congregations.” You all, we all, tend to get down to it and right quick. Likewise, the letter to the Ephesians isn’t most readings. In fact, this letter is disputed as one of Paul’s because not even Paul tends to get this carried away.

Our writer this morning is overcome—overcome by the Incarnation of God and all that it entails and implies. It’s as if he was spurred to name five implications of God embodied, and quickly. So he does:

Us: chosen in Christ to be holy and blameless—neither casting blame nor taking on blame but relating with one another in holier ways, through Christ.

Us: destined as adopted into God’s family so to be heirs of divine promise and faithful good news, and so to enlarge the people of God, beyond the people Israel, to gather in the whole world.

Us: redeemed through Christ's blood, that all the blood we've spilt will be redeemed, that all the blood we've let loose—let loose in God's name, in let loose in some superstition that by violence we will be saved from violence—will be redeemed, that all our death-dealing will be flipped inside out—spilt blood turned lifeblood once again.

Us: now knowing the mystery of God's will, revealed to us in the life and love and self-giving way of Christ.

Us: gathered up and together (the whole creation!), not by coercion or manipulation, but according to God's good pleasure and the freeing power of the Holy Spirit.

This reading could serve as foundation for quite a substantive sermon series. But one commentary I read had the writer urging a simple enjoyment of the poetry pouring forth—this rush and gush of mystery and promise offered in urgent joy and praise. Don't analyze it! Instead, accept it, let it in, and try it out: see over the course of the season, or the year, whether it's true, whether it works.

What's it like to live without blame—not doing it, not participating it? Does it feel in some way holy?

What would it mean to be adopted into God's family? Born into one state over which we had no choice, but chosen into another more gracious state: what could that possibly be about?

What if Christ's blood were the last blood we were ever to shed out of fear and anxiety, out of a misdirected move toward peace and safety?

What if we knew that we know what we need to know so to know how best to live—and not only for our own sakes but the sake of all? God's will revealed.

Meanwhile, simply enjoy what the writer to the Ephesians enjoyed: thanks and praise, praise and glory, glory and blessing: God-with-us.

Yup, I love Christmas. But I'll admit that I love it a bit less now than I used to. It's been one of the costs of becoming a pastor. What used to be concentrated in one day, or even one season: the mystery and celebration, the hope and the joy, the light in the darkness made real in the candlelight service on Christmas Eve, the God-with-

us-ness of it all: it's no longer concentrated. It's now spread out over the whole church (and preaching) year, it's now my everyday.

And, of course, you know I'm not the only minister in the room. It says so right here, on the back of the bulletin: Ministers: All Members of the Congregation.

That's you.

Thanks be to God.