

Christmas Eve Sermon

December 24, 2015

Trinity Parish Seattle

Jeffrey Gill

Luke 2:1-14

Merry Christmas, everyone! It's wonderful to see you here on this Christmas Eve. If this is your first time here, we welcome you! If you're just visiting with family or friends, we welcome you! If you live in the neighborhood and have always wondered what it was like on the inside of this somewhat mysterious building on the corner, we welcome you! If you're a member or regular worshipper here at Trinity, we're so grateful for your presence in our life in this wonderful place.

[And how about our pageant players?! Didn't they do a great job!

We've come together here tonight to make an outrageous claim – that *God is with us*. We thought God lived way out there! We thought God was enthroned on high! We thought God was far away, distant, and beyond all our knowing. We thought God was unapproachable, transcending the created order, and ultimately unapproachable. But tonight, we make a different claim. God is with us!

Our sometimes sentimental and romanticized versions of Christmas, which we're certainly not immune from here tonight, want us to focus on a baby born in a stable long ago who came down from heaven to be the savior of the world. There's no question that even with all the miraculous birth stories from both testaments of the Bible this one stands out for its improbable claims on both our reason and our imagination. How is it that God could take on human flesh?! How

could it be that one who existed from before time and eternity would become as vulnerable as a newborn baby, so subject to the impermanence of the human form, so constrained to the limitations of the material world, time and space?!

But this child, who was Jesus of Nazareth, came to reveal an even deeper reality, which is that *God is always with us*. Tonight we are not here to celebrate just an event over 2,000 years ago in a faraway place, but a truth about who and where God is. Jesus' birth, his life, everything about his ministry and his teaching, as well as his death and resurrection were to reveal what is always and everywhere true, and that is that God is here. God is with us. God is the ground of our being, the truest thing about our reality. It is in God that we live and move and have our being. In his life we witness what it means – what it looks like – to live in that reality. And when we do, it changes everything.

We live in a society that has so trivialized Christmas and what it means – and I don't just mean the commercialization that we're all so aware of. I mean a culture in which some want the test of your Christian faith to be measured by how outraged you are that Starbucks doesn't say Merry Christmas on its red cup – or by whether you say Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays to people at the checkout in the grocery or department store. I would suggest that there are indeed legitimate reasons why a Christian might want to express outrage in our society, but that they have more to do with the continuing problems of homelessness on our streets, rising levels of income inequality, racism, and the epidemic of gun violence that afflicts our nation.

These are things that just do not make any sense at all from the lens of a faith that proclaims God with us. When the message of Christmas really dawns on us – when our eyes are opened to the reality of this

story – that God is with us, in all of creation, in our very being and the very being of our neighbors, and we begin to stand in awe of that and live into the implications of such a proclamation – it will change our world from the nightmare it often is, to the dream that God has for us and for all people.

When you look at this planet earth from space – and we’ve all seen the pictures – especially those taken from far, far away, say at the outer reaches of our solar system – it’s hard to conceive that all of us living here on this little speck together are not in fact neighbors, or that we are not all one in substance and that our destiny is not bound up together. And if it really is true that we are all neighbors, and that we are one in substance sharing a common origin and destiny as a people, it surely puts the conflicts we face here at home and throughout the world in a whole new light.

Jesus was born into a conflicted world. And it was in that context that he taught us to welcome the stranger, to love our neighbors as ourselves, and yes, even to love our enemies – which is very hard to do if you do not see them as your neighbors first of all, as children of God and as people made in the image of God. We too often seem to be more interested in drawing lines and raising walls between people than actually getting to know them, and learning, yes, to love them.

Some of you may have heard me tell this story before, but it bears repeating in the times in which we live. Just a few years ago I was having dinner with my family in a North African restaurant in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just as the so-called Arab Spring was underway. We were the only ones in the restaurant. And the owner, who was seated at the table next to us, started up a conversation with us. We began with the politics of Tunisia and Libya and eventually

began talking about religion. She was dressed in very traditional Islamic dress, and her husband, she told us proudly, is an imam.

She started to talk about Mary and Jesus, and she began to weep as she told us how much she loves Jesus, or Isa in Arabic. She quoted verses from the Qur'an and the Hadith that talk about his physical appearance and about his love. Tears streamed down her cheeks. It dawned on me that I had not expected such devotion to our Lord from a Muslim; but I also had to try to remember whether I had ever witnessed a Christian speak with such depth of feeling and emotion about our Lord and his Mother.

Yes, there are differences in how we understand who Jesus is, even among Christians. But this was no time for a theological debate. I felt myself compelled to listen – and to allow my heart to be open to someone who had such obvious love in her heart. I realized that God was present in our midst and in our conversation. I marveled at her tears. And I wondered then and now what would happen if we allowed ourselves to listen deeply across all the divisions in our human family, what we might actually hear, and what we might actually learn from and about one another.

The story of Christmas is not just a miracle that happened long ago. It is a story that reveals an underlying truth to all of life and all of existence – that God is with us. God is here within us and among us. When we persist at looking for what divides us, we miss the reality of God with us. And it shows in how we think about and how we treat those we deem other than ourselves. Some have suggested that the best way for us to keep Christ in Christmas is not to print Merry Christmas on coffee cups or erect manger scenes in public places, but to love our neighbors as ourselves, to do good to those who

despitefully use us, to love our enemies, to welcome the stranger and to feed the hungry and clothe the naked – actions that come naturally from those whose eyes have been opened to the reality of God with us.

There seems to be an awful lot of fear in our country today – fears that are easily projected onto groups of people, whether Muslims, or immigrants, or refugees, or people of a different race or religion – lots of worldly passions that seemingly run unchecked. The epistle of Paul to Titus, read each year on this night, seems especially appropriate in this light. He says,

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. (Titus 2:11-14)

Tonight we once again receive the grace of God in the child who has appeared, bringing salvation to all. And we make that outrageous claim that through his birth a light has come into the world, shining into the darkness and opening our eyes to a deep truth – that God is with us. It is a truth that changes everything if we will believe it, and if we will begin to try to live it.

Merry Christmas everyone!