

Sermon preached at Grace Epiphany Church, Philadelphia
24 December 2009

Christmas Eve(I): Ps 96; Isa 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Lk 2:1-14(15-20)

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Good evening! So—everyone take a deep breath. You’ve made it through another hectic holiday season, your carefully thought-out gifts are all wrapped, your scrumptious food is all cooked or ready to be cooked, your home is clean and decorated and welcoming. (I’m quite envious, because none of this is true of my home—but that’s another story.) You’ve made it to another Christmas deadline having completed one of the longest to-do lists of the year, you’re here in church to remind yourselves why we do any of this, and so it’s time to sit back, breathe deep, calm yourselves, and still your hearts.

And now, everyone take another deep breath—for having made it (just barely for some of us) through this past year, when the recession and financial hardship made it feel like we were waking up every morning to a permanently smoggy, sooty sky such as they have in fact every day in Beijing. We made it through a year when we discovered that even a young, brilliant, energetic president who knows how to think out of the box—even this promising young man could not bring the new tone of civility that he promised to the halls of government. He could not turn around within a matter of weeks or months a recession that took a decade or more of unfettered greed, unchallenged lying, and unexamined self-delusion to create. We found that he could not find quick solutions to the problems created by others in Iraq and Afghanistan; he could not resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and he could not bring his fellow Americans to take responsibility for our huge contribution to global warming and to impending ecological disaster. Some of his critics have delighted in pointing out his inability to accomplish any of these goals in the eleven months he’s been in office, and other critics are very frank about their fervent wish that he not accomplish any of these goals at all.

I remind us all that even God allowed his only-begotten Son three years of effective ministry to change the world, and documents of the time indicate that the movement he started was not terribly promising, at least not at first.

And now, take a deep breath, you people of Grace Epiphany. We’ve made it through another year, surviving and striving to do the work that God asks us to do—to raise our children in the knowledge of God’s love, to give what we can to the homeless and hungry of Philadelphia, to help with the schooling of a few children in Mali who are among the most destitute and neglected people on the planet. And take a special deep breath, you ladies of the Altar Guild, who have worked through an unexpected rescheduling to present our beautiful church building in all its Christmas glory.

And now, take a deep breath all you good Christian people, whether you are weekly Sunday worshippers, once-a-month regulars, occasional drop-ins, or whether you come to see the rest of us just twice a year just to make sure we’re still here, and that the story hasn’t changed. One of our Episcopal Church slogans is “Wherever you are on your journey of faith, the Episcopal Church welcomes you.” And I can reassure you that the story has not changed, the story of God coming to be with us through Jesus Christ, born in a stable; teaching us a new way of being human and a new way of being in relationship with God; running afoul of the entrenched power structure; getting arrested, tortured, and executed; and then rising from the dead to give his followers an enduring hope that they would pass on to generation upon

generation of God's Church—it's still the same story, for many of us it is still the most powerful story ever told.

Each passing year it seems there are new people who want to talk us out of our Christian story, out of our Christian faith. Each passing year it seems to become more difficult to be Christians in the Episcopal Church when Christianity seems always to be more visibly and loudly represented by people who express their faith very differently than the way most of us do, people for whom the rock-bottom, fundamental issues of Christian faith are not oppression, injustice, and poverty, but rather abortion and homosexuality.

The latest entry into this conversation about the validity, the utility, and the necessity of faith is a book called *Good Without God: What a Billion Nonreligious People Do Believe*, by the secular humanist chaplain at Harvard. People seem to pop up every day to wrestle in public with their atheism—to defend it, to preach it, or just to wonder about it. In an op-ed piece this month in the *Toronto Globe and Mail*, a writer says, "I used to scoff at Christmas-and-Easter Christians—the people who turn up at church twice a year in a sort of last, nostalgic grasp at faith, or who take their children 'so they'll be exposed to it.' But now, I'm one of those people too." She talks about the Christmas service at her local church: "The minister read the Christmas story, which I knew by heart. On an impulse, I knelt at the altar for communion and took the wine and wafer. The congregation recited the *Lord's Prayer*. We all sang *Silent Night*, lit candles in the dark and wished our neighbours Merry Christmas. I didn't believe a word of it, not a word. But it didn't matter. I was so affected that I could scarcely speak. And so, although I would never call myself a believer, 'atheist' doesn't sound right either. 'Reluctant nonbeliever' is more like it."

One of my favorite second-rate novels is *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh. The narrator is a confirmed atheist named Charles Ryder, and he has become best friends with his Oxford schoolmate Sebastian Flyte, an alcoholic and troubled son of an aristocratic Catholic family. Charles notes that, "Often, almost daily, since I had known Sebastian, some chance word in his conversation had reminded me that he was a Catholic, but I took it as a foible, like his Teddy-bear." In one conversation, Charles asks,

"I suppose they try and make you believe an awful lot of nonsense?"

"Is it nonsense? I wish it were. It sometimes sounds terribly sensible to me."

"But, my dear Sebastian, you can't seriously *believe* it all."

"Can't I?"

"I mean about Christmas and the star and the three kings and the ox and the ass."

"Oh yes, I believe that. It's a lovely idea."

"But you can't *believe* things because they're a lovely idea."

"But I *do*. That's how I believe."

The op-ed writer and the complicated Sebastian are saying to the secular rationalists among us, to the people who would just as soon do without God for whatever reason, that they and perhaps the rest of us are not simply animals who happen to reason. The deepest thinkers throughout our human history, those who've observed our human experience most broadly and most insightfully, have known this to be true. We are also people of feelings and passions; we are also people of longing; we are also people who can't help thinking that there is a transcendent force out there and in here who is keeping us company in what would otherwise be a devastatingly lonely universe.

Not once did Jesus ever say, "Believe in me, because it makes sense. Believe in me because it's reasonable and rational." What he said was (and I'm paraphrasing somewhat

loosely) “Believe in me because through me God in his infinite love, in his infinite mercy, intends to heal the brokenness of the world. Through me living through you God is working to make the world a place of peace and justice, of compassion and mercy and reconciliation. Through me living through you God wants to see the fulfillment of God’s dream for the entire world that God created and loves.”

We can come to faith through our reason. I’m here to tell you that that’s possible but (at least in my case) it was not the most efficient or effective method. We can come to faith also because of being in a beautiful house of worship beautifully decorated, hearing the story we know by heart, singing the hymns we’ve sung since childhood. But however we have come to faith, it is important to remember that what God wants from our faith is a lot more than mere statements of belief. What God wants from us is an acknowledgment—however we come to it—that God has been among us, that God has acted and continues to act for our salvation, for our redemption. What God wants from us is our persistent effort to live according to the best in our natures and not the worst. What God wants from us is to do God’s work in the world—feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, naming and fighting the greed and injustice that kills our fellow children of God and deadens our spirits, ending systemic oppression, ending the curse of war.

However we manage to let God into our hearts, the thing to remember is that that is what this night is for. If you access your heart primarily through your mind and your reason—which was my unfortunate procedure during my formation as a priest—so be it. But if you are like a lot of people and can allow yourself to be affected—so affected that you can barely speak—by the candle-lit darkness, by the familiar music, by the words of faith spoken through the lips and hopefully resonating in the heart, by the momentary irrational impulse that brings you forward to take the wine and the wafer, then be assured God is in that moment, too.

A Christmas hymn that has recently become one of my absolute favorites will be sung by the choir later in the service—“A Stable Lamp Is Lighted.” It is different from the ones we’re more familiar with not only because of its dark, mysterious tone, but also because it takes the baby Jesus from the stable in Bethlehem to his passion and death. It reminds us that the story is all of one piece. Here is the last verse:

*But now, as at the ending
The low is lifted high
The stars shall bend their voices,
And every stone shall cry.
And every stone shall cry,
In praises of the child
By whose descent among us
The worlds are reconciled.*

And now, take one final deep breath. Breathe deep and go out from this place to tell your friends: the story has not changed. The story is still about God’s great desire for a world that is reconciled within itself, a world that is reconciled to God. Much work is still required to fulfill that story, much work is still required to make God’s passionate dream for us come true. But the story is still the same.

Merry Christmas!