

Home for the Holidays

Christ Episcopal Church, Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida

December 13, 2009

Readings: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12: 2-6; Philippians 4: 4-7; Luke 3: 7-18

Good morning. My name is Mike Schut; I work for the Episcopal Church as Economic and Environmental Affairs Officer.

I'm particularly aware of the season today, of Advent, and so am especially grateful and honored for the opportunity to offer these reflections today. Thank you to Father Westbury and others for sharing the pulpit. It certainly has also been an honor to be here these last few days for the staff retreat on Thursday and the Advent retreat yesterday.

I'd like to begin today by asking you to engage your imagination. Close your eyes if you will...now take a moment to picture home to you. Not even necessarily the place you will lay your head to rest tonight...but that place that feels most like home to you in your bones, in your heart. Imagine yourself there, especially imagine your natural surroundings, the place, the smells, the sounds, the plants...feel what it is like to be "Home."

Got it? Ok, you can open your eyes. We'll come back to that later.

You Brood of Vipers

For me the reading from Luke today has one of Scriptures more memorable phrases "You Brood of Vipers!" Imagine, walking down to the river, desiring baptism, but probably not expecting that welcome -- not necessarily prepared for John's greeting and following exhortation to repent and bear good fruit as evidence of that repentance.

I don't think we usually approach or prepare for Advent in such a way as to expect a similar challenge, one that perhaps stops us in our tracks.

But let's not forget that this is a season of preparing for the birth of someone whose life, words and actions were so disturbing and challenging to his culture's power structure, to those on the inside blessed with status and wealth, that he was tortured and put to death.

The manger is one of our most poignant, profound images of a loving, vulnerable God. It is beautiful and glorious beyond the telling. But Advent is not only beautiful and glorious -- it is potentially unsettling and challenging as well.

What's Jesus Waiting For?

When I was preparing for and thinking about Advent as a time of waiting for Jesus I found myself wondering, "Well, what sort of world is Jesus waiting for? If he were preparing for and experiencing Advent, what would he be longing for, preparing for, working toward?"

I'm convinced that one powerful way of describing what Jesus longs for is this: a world where all of us return to being home, to being rooted here, on Earth.

CEEP, Consortium of Endowed Episcopal Parishes, has been working with a consulting firm to identify the most important qualities future church leaders will need. One of them is bio-empathy: being empathetic with and to life. Similarly, the great Harvard ecologist EO Wilson believes we are hard wired to love life, what he calls biophilia...the love of life. We need to be re-connected with that love; our leaders need to be people who know of and feel that love and can convey and offer experiences to others that help heal the disconnect we so often feel from one another and the rest of God's creation, God's home.

Let's come home for the holidays.

Economics, Ecology and Ecumenical

You might have noticed that the title of my job includes both the word environment and the word economics. The job title itself acknowledges the profound connection between

economics and ecology – notice that they start with the same three letters, e-c-o, because they share the same Greek root word of *oikos* (o-i-k-o-s) which essentially means household. The word ecumenical shares that same root word. *Oikoumene* means the whole inhabited world.

God's *oikoumene*, God's world, the kind of world into which we would want to invite Jesus, would be a place where the economy, no matter its form, would be nestled within ecological systems. And for us to live in that kind of place, within that sort of economy: that is what I mean by coming home in a profound way.

Right now we have an economy that does violence to vast swaths of God's household. Right now the economy sees all of creation primarily as a resource, and does not recognize that ultimately all wealth depends on healthy ecological systems.

Just to be clear I am not advocating for one form of economy or another -- say capitalism or socialism -- but simply asking us to look at the fruit of our economy. Just like John the Baptist asked those receiving baptism to bear fruit.

Of course, judging the fruits of anything depends on one's vantage point.

For most of us here today, even in the midst of very significant economic difficulties, the fruits are fairly tasty. We have so much for which to be thankful.

But in the midst of difficult times we are often more willing and open to ask questions of how that economy is or is not working -- what sort of fruits that economy bears and if those are the sorts of fruits we desire and that Jesus would find tasty as well.

A moment ago I mentioned the word "violence" in describing the fruits of our economic system. That is a strong word. To see that, I think we need to open ourselves up to different vantage points, to try to walk in the shoes of another.

Why? Most simply because that is what Jesus always did; he spoke up on behalf of the oppressed, those whose voices were not heard and asked those around him to put themselves in those shoes as well.

I wrote a poem a couple years ago which I would like to read. I ask you to be open to see from some of the points of views portrayed in this poem:

The Grand Parade

The color of heaviness
as you turn, slowly, deliberately, and finally.

Polar bear eyes fierce;
you and I, former prey, now turned predator armed with nothing but melting ice.
You lumber away, all grace intact.

Native American eyes an impossible blend of infinite sadness and broken trust –
Columbus' arrival your 9/11 –
and yet brimming with the pride and joy of knowing who you are
and where you're from.
You walk away, tall, drumming, chanting.

African American eyes dumbfounded, exploding with rage
tempered by camaraderie, wells of laughter,
blues, jazz, gospel, rhythm, and dance.
You, depending, walk, run, or shuck and jive away, together,
somehow still singing.

The American family farmer, eyes full of desire to stay,
suddenly even you...
Did you walk away? Seems you just disappeared.

Tropical flower, deep-sea bottom-dweller, never seen or named by humankind
-- your eyes will never be read.
You really did disappear.

You all turn, with right on your side.
Either we all choose to join you, walk side-by-side
leading one another,
Or we turn too, arrogant, hearts clenched
Refusing to witness your grand parade disappear over the horizon.

Lost and lonely in our victory.

I've experienced first-hand two other vantage points since writing that.

First, this past spring I met church leaders from 16 Pacific island nations like Fiji, Vanuatu, Tuvalu, Samoa and the Solomon Islands. They listened as a member of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change talked about the likelihood that the entire populations of both Tuvalu and Kiribati would need to be re-located in 20 to 30 years due to rising sea levels and increased frequency and severity of storms... both impacts related to climate change.

As we began this morning, I asked you to imagine your home. Now please imagine it is gone...and that you cannot go back.

That is what the peoples of Tuvalu and Kiribati face.

I also met leaders from the Episcopal Church in the Philippines and received a letter from them, saying:

“A year ago, our own Bishop of our Diocese of North Central Philippines, Rt. Rev. Joel A. Pachao, said in a meeting with some of our foreign partners, ‘We are doing all these environmental stewardship programs so that you can continue to drive your SUVs.’ It was an expression of anger...over the fact that it is us in the so-called ‘developing...countries’ who are suffering most from the effects of climate change which can be attributed to carbon...emissions, the bulk of which are from the western developed countries.”

That is a brother of ours from the Anglican Communion. These are challenging words from our brothers and sisters across the globe -- words describing their homes.

So to come home profoundly this and every holiday season would mean to come home to God's creation, to root ourselves here again, to fall in love with all of life and to help create an economy that also honors that life.

This is the challenge of our time, for if we do not, we will continue to create a world of inequity, of rising sea levels; a world where God's species go extinct at a rate not seen since the dinosaurs disappeared; and a world where those of us with more than enough continue

to pursue even more when study after study show it is not the amount of stuff we have that makes us happy.

Imagine bending down to the manger, taking the baby Jesus into your arms and showing him around today. Showing him around God's household. What would you want to show him? Where would you want to take him? There is so much beauty and there is so much pain. To be honest, we'd have to show him both.

And then imagine introducing Jesus into the joys of the place that is most home to you today. Then bring him to Tuvalu and Kiribati to visit the homes of our fellow travelers there. Imagine welcoming Jesus into a healed and whole household of God. A healed and whole *oikos*. It would be a place where all creation -- humans and other-than-human -- have a home. It would be a place with neither rich nor poor. It would be a place where our economy has nestled itself back where it belongs into the logic and limits of God's household.

The good news is that in so doing we will also find ways of life more fulfilling, full of community and connections with all of creation. It's the kind of home Jesus is working, and waiting, for.

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