

Sermon Advent 4

Year A

[RCL] Isaiah 7:10-16, Psalm 80: 1-7, Romans 1:1-7, Matthew 1:18-25

God is With Us!

Fourth Sunday in Advent, and one wonders: What remains to be said about the season?

Year after year, preachers and priests must wonder: How can one tell the story of Jesus' birth without falling into historical and cultural clichés, without being accused of mythologizing? Or: Without being accused of not following the Scriptures word for word? How can we make the familiar exciting again?

It is so difficult to preach on the birth narratives that most pastors and priests find it easier to let the story be told by the children, in their Christmas pageants—something beloved by almost all parishes. Presenting the story of Jesus' birth dramatically, rather than in a sermon from the pulpit, may be the better solution. Why try to retell the most beautiful story ever told when it is already written so simply and perfectly by Matthew and so masterfully by Luke?

The simple beauty of the story as found in the two gospels cannot be improved upon. Only great artists have found another way - through their works of art - to help us see with new eyes. Centuries later people still flock to the world's great museums to see depictions of the Birth story by the finest of painters. A few well known artists come to mind: da Vinci, Caravaggio, El Greco and so many others not as well known. Their creations tell the stunning story of God entering the human realm. Nothing proclaims the Christmas news as movingly as some of these works. And it is not only visual artists who accomplish this.

The most evocative poetry has been written about that one night in Bethlehem, while the great composers continue to lift us to a heavenly realm when as they sing of this unique birth. Please, pause for a minute and try to think if any song as exquisite to your ears as the melody and words of "Lo, how a rose e're blooming on tender stem hath sprung . . ." And now recall the words of Christina Rossetti's poem, "In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood still as iron, water like a stone . . ." Each word is a jewel.

Now sing it to the melody by Holst and let your heart melt within you. Isn't that the ultimate Christmas feeling? This is a deliberate question. At Christmas time we want to feel, not to think. This is why children are so happy at Christmas; they allow themselves to feel anticipation and joy without worrying about practical details that ultimately don't matter.

When we grow up and reach maturity, we tend to examine the words we say and sing. We ask questions about their meaning, questions that in all probability cannot be answered. "If the birth of Jesus really happened as the gospel writers tell us, what happened to the promises of peace on earth,

good will toward all human beings?” After we look at the world around us and despair of the answers we do receive, many of us turn to books and theology, and that too is helpful. It is good to examine the questions, but let us admit it: these are at best intellectual exercises.

Let us instead throw ourselves into the music and drama of the story and perhaps then we shall find peace and even joy. It is undeniable that visual art, music, poetry, and drama take us out of ourselves as they communicate the gospel story in ways that bring us peace and even joy. The story of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection is the perfect drama.

The great Dorothy L Sayers in her masterpiece, *The Man Born to Be King*, writes that for the dramatist the theology in the story of Jesus “locks the whole structure into a massive intellectual coherence.” She continues: “It is scarcely possible to build up anything lopsided, trivial, or unsound on that steely and gigantic framework.” And she fulfilled this conviction by writing, in 1943, her twelve radio plays on “The Man Born to Be King.” Very few had attempted a dramatic presentation of the life of Jesus before her. Only medieval plays and the depiction in Oberammergau had done so. Yet, the ancient Greeks worshiped by going to the theater; seeing the great tragedies of their myths was a religious experience. Theater started as a religious expression.

We also, citizens of this already troubled twenty-first century, enjoy the emotional appreciation of the nativity story fully when we see it acted out. But it doesn’t mean much in the long run unless we make the effort to move from the enjoyment and emotion to this “massive intellectual coherence” which is so effective as drama. We cannot remain starry-eyed in the worship of an infant; we must move forward to the ministry of the man Jesus without losing the mystery of the divine drama. How can we possibly tell in ordinary words this stunning, startling event of God’s breaking through in what has been called “the scandal of particularity,” of the Timeless entering Time?

It so troubling to many of us in this season to talk to Christians who speak of the coming of Jesus without trembling at the thought of the Incarnation, of God deliberately taking on flesh! This fearful, truly awesome reality has become so ordinary for us that we mention it without really taking it in. It is such an unprecedented event, this unique event in history, that Matthew and Luke tell it in the simplest terms but with heavenly imagery.

And therein lies the drama. A very pregnant virgin and her husband travel over difficult terrain from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Both the virgin and her future husband are visited by angels. Angels break through and sing of glory after the baby is born, while animals and the poorest of the poor gather around a little baby to sing of peace and good will. How else can something so dramatic be told in order to shake us out of complacency?

St. Paul gives it a try in the opening greeting of his letter to the Romans, the passage we read today, and ends up trying to contain the immense drama in 102 Greek words that form one long sentence. He speaks of “. . . his Son, who descended from David according to the flesh and was declared Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead,” and the sentence is still

not finished. He trips over his words in speaking of this astounding event. But when writing to the Philippians he succeeds fully in utter and profound simplicity: “He emptied himself, taking the form of a slave,” he says of the eternal, the cosmic Christ. This is what Matthew means when he writes that the angel said to Joseph: “. . . for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” We imagine Joseph hiding his face and thinking, “I don’t understand any of it, but I will do as you say.”

The excellent American folklorist, John Jacob Niles, heard three words sung in the Appalachian town of Murphy, North Carolina and went on to compose the heart-breaking, simple melody and words of “I wonder as I wander right under the sky how Jesus the Savior did come for to die. . .” We must never stop wondering.

To move from drama and simplicity to the greatness and baroque richness of Bach and Handel, is to experience fully the reality that God dwells also in the beauty of sound. The whole drama of the biblical story of the Christ, from the Fall to the song of the angels and beyond, is found in Handel’s masterpiece Messiah. Those of us who have sung this oratorio through many years have memorized, together with the music, the words of the great prophets. Thanks to Handel and his brilliant lyricist, Charles Jennens, who poured over the Authorized Version, countless folks who have never read the Bible have memorized the most beautiful and comforting words of Scripture!

“Comfort ye my people.”

“Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill made low; the crooked, straight. . .”

“He shall feed his flock like a shepherd and carry them in his bosom.”

And from today’s lesson: “Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel, God with us.”

God with us! What a wondrous promise. What a loving reality. Hold on to that. Hold on to the drama of the Eternal entering Time, of the Invisible becoming Visible in the face of Jesus, a baby in human form who grew up to show us the heart of God. And enter into the season of Christmas with the feelings of a child and the meditations of wise Christians. Immanuel: the mystery and glory of the Incarnation.

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