

Sermon for Christmas Day Year C

[RCL] Isaiah 62:6-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20; Psalm 97

Light has sprung up for the righteous, and joyful gladness for those who are truehearted! Rejoice in the Lord, you righteous, and give thanks to God's holy name! (Psalm 97)

Christmas Day in our churches has a different kind of light than Christmas Eve. Christmas Eve is all stars and brightness, angels and adoration and Glory to God in the Highest! Christmas Day is quieter. In the December morning light, we're left with the holy family after the angels and shepherds have departed. We're left with Mary, to treasure all that has occurred and ponder in our hearts. Everything has changed. Quite literally, the incarnation of Jesus Christ has changed everything.

In the encounter of the angels and the shepherds, we've witnessed a coming together of heaven and earth, joining Joseph and Mary to witness a miracle. This miracle is more than an encounter between human and divine, such as Mary experienced in the Annunciation or the shepherds experienced in the appearance of the angel. In the infant Jesus, the boundaries between heaven and earth have dissolved. By Christ's incarnation – his life as a human being among other human beings – the divine crossed into the human realm.

Over and over again in the gospels, in the witness of the life and words of Jesus Christ, we encounter this intersection of human and divine, until his death and resurrection when the man Jesus crosses into the divine realm. Birth and death are threshold events for us as mortal beings, crossing between earthly and eternal life. But in Jesus, it's not a question of crossing back and forth. It's a question of being both at once, a unity of the human and the divine for all eternity. A very big idea: eternity. Yet made concrete in a newborn child. This is the miracle that we ponder with Mary on this Christmas Day.

We might ponder the reason for the miracle. Why? What is the purpose of this miracle of incarnation?

Prophets and theologians have pondered this for millennia. In today's readings, both Isaiah and Paul speak of salvation. Isaiah proclaims, "See, your salvation comes." Paul writes in the letter to Titus, "When the goodness and loving-kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us."

What is salvation exactly? Salvation can be defined as deliverance from sin and sin's consequences. For the ancient Hebrews, salvation was deliverance from exile in Egypt, and later from Babylon into the Promised Land. For Christians through the millennia, salvation has been embodied in Jesus Christ who brought the kingdom of God to earth and who will ultimately, in the words of the Nicene Creed, "come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and God's kingdom will have no end."

Anglican theologians have pondered the incarnation too, of course. For William Temple, Archbishop of Canterbury during the Second World War, the incarnation was significant because

God left heaven and entered the course of human history to be an example for human life. Temple's social ethics and his entire worldview follow from this theological understanding of the incarnation. Temple believed and expected that because of the incarnation, social transformation is both needed and possible. That it is the church's right and duty to call for social change and that the church must play a role in public life. The incarnation impacts our lives. Because of the incarnation we are called to build the kingdom of God on earth. We are called to love and serve those in need. Salvation here and now – salvation in history – is achieved by faith and our actions. The church has a role to play in attaining salvation. Temple wrote, "The Church must announce Christian principles and point out where the existing social order at any time is in conflict with them. It must then pass on to Christian citizens acting in their civic capacity, the task of re-shaping the existing order in closer conformity to the principles."

Twentieth-century Anglican laywoman and mystic Evelyn Underhill was also deeply committed to the theology of the incarnation. She writes about "continuing incarnation," offering our lives as a means for achieving the kingdom, God's work on earth, by weaving together our inner and outer lives through prayer and action.

So, what then are the implications of the incarnation for the mission of the church here and now? Let us ponder with Mary on the morning of Christ's birth. The incarnate Christ was both God and human. As we human beings seek to become united with God through prayer, praise, and thanksgiving, let us also seek to become united with our fellow human beings through community and action in community. Salvation is achieved through faith and our actions. We are called to remember the poor and the oppressed, the weak, the weary, the prisoners, the homeless, and the displaced.

We can't all do everything, but at least each one of us can do something about one particular agony in the world. We can take one step outside of the circle of the familiar towards knowledge and reconciliation with the unfamiliar. We can love God in Christ Jesus by loving our neighbors, crossing the street and meeting a stranger. Even better, you can take the hand of someone in your church community and cross the street together. And then join in community and offer openhearted hospitality to a stranger's community.

As individuals and as the Church – the body of Christ – we are called to build the kingdom of Heaven on earth. The apostle Paul tells us that the kingdom of God is justice and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. The prophet Micah tells us that all God requires of us is to do justice, to love kindness, and to walk humbly with our God. We are called to pray, to faithfully reflect on our responsibility to God and our neighbor, and to act for justice and reconciliation. We are called to participate in Christ's rescuing mission in the world. Let us commit to being people of the incarnation. Let us go forth into the world to love and serve with gladness and singleness of heart, looking for the opportunity to do the work of God on earth. As we leave church on this Christmas morning, let us accept the invitation to ponder a step toward bringing the kingdom of God to earth. What one particular agony in your world, community, neighborhood, or family can you do something about today?

Let us pray. Gracious God, grant that we may be travelers like Joseph and Mary, searching for a place for God to rest in love. Grant that we may be messengers like the angel of the Lord,

bringing good news of great joy to all the people. Grant that we may be worshippers like the heavenly host, praising God and saying glory to God in the highest heaven. Grant that we may be believers like the shepherds, hastening to witness a miracle. Grant that we may be contemplative as Mary, pondering the meaning of the incarnation in our hearts. Grant that we may have the temerity to risk offering our lives as a means to do God's work on earth, as it is in heaven. Amen.

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