

Sermon for Christmas Eve Year C

[RCL] Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20); Psalm 96

The late bishop of the Diocese of Massachusetts, The Right Rev. Thomas Shaw, posted a series of videos on YouTube called “A Monk in the Midst.” He was a brother of the Society of St. John the Evangelist as well as being an Episcopal bishop. He spoke in one of these videos about an encounter he had with a man named Fred and his six-year-old son Sam about what they were going to do on Christmas. The father explained that they would get up and open their presents on Christmas morning and then go to church. The son replied, “Church?! On Christmas? We’re going to go to church on Christmas?” Fred patiently explained, “Of course, that’s what Christmas is all about. It’s about Jesus’ birth and God coming to us.” Sam said, “I know, I know, I know! But Christmas! Church wrecks everything!” The church wrecks everything. Yes, yes it does and tonight we come here to encounter not only the church that wrecks everything, but also the child who was born to wreck everything.

It may sound a bit odd in the face of our culture’s approach to Christmas and even disquieting in an age where terrorism dominates the news cycle. But we dare not forget the scandal of both the cradle and the cross and be lulled by the culture’s attempts to sentimentalize Christmas. We all do it and to be honest, it even happens in the church.

Think for a moment about how our own hymnody conspires to tame this feast day into something more palatable and ... dare we even say ... *nice*. Consider the opening of the beloved carol *O Little Town of Bethlehem*, “O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” Lovely words from Phillips Brooks but if we think about the tumultuous history of the Middle East, imaging Bethlehem as peaceful more expresses a longing than an historical reality. And what about *Away In A Manger* telling us, “The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus no crying he makes?” No crying? Any nurse or doctor would call that a zero on the Apgar score and would start resuscitation attempts immediately. Seriously, these images may just be conspiring to sentimentalize the scandal of Christmas.

What about those emotional expectations of the holidays? You know, those happy family get-togethers that often don’t turn out so great or the longing for an estranged relationship to magically get better and be resolved in some kind of Christmas miracle. Of course, there’s the cultural pressure to over consume. Whether it’s going overboard with buying presents and dreading the credit card bill in January or over-eating and drinking and dreading what the scale will tell you in January. Between sentimentality, emotional burdens, and unrealistic cultural expectations, perhaps we need this child of God to wreck what we’ve made of Christmas.

The reality is we come together this night to pay honor to the one who came to wreck all of that, the one who came to wreck everything! This child’s birth was the plan of a subversive God who snuck into the back door of history on a mission to wreck everything. Coming as one of us – vulnerable, poor, and powerless – he came to upend the world as we have constructed it.

He came to wreck our selfishness and narcissism, so that we might be able to love God and others and to receive that love in return. He came to wreck our fear of death, so that we might be able to live more fully and freely in this life. He came to wreck the political systems which choose who is in and who is out, so that all of God's children would be included in the kingdom. He came to break down our tendency of tribalism pitting one group against another. Oh yes, we still organize ourselves into tribes; we just call them political parties, ethnic groups, or faith traditions now. He came to break down our economy of values to build a different one based on valuing the eternal rather than things that pass away. He came to break down our ideas of family to embrace a wider vision of God's family, which includes all people, not just the ones like us. Yes, he came to wreck every structure we try to build which puts us first at the expense of everyone else. As he would later tell his followers, he came not to be served but to serve. And he calls us to follow in his path.

This is no small thing. For 2000 plus years, people have come together to mark the birth of Christ as God's subversive way of dwelling among us and wrecking everything for the sake of bringing about something greater than we could ask for or imagine. To mark a vision of the kingdom of God unfolding right here in our midst regardless of our fears or of the conflict we may be experiencing. May this holy child, this holy one man wrecking crew, disrupt your life this season so that he might plant the grace of God in your heart and you may come to know Christ's love.

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