

Sermons at Christ Church

Reaching Out In Faith.

Advent IV

The Reverend Emmanuel Ato Mercer

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.

John begins his gospel by invoking the same creation language we read in Genesis. John recognizes the importance of Jesus's presence as the beginning of a new creation. The word which was instrumental in the first creation is the same word which now dwells in human flesh and lies in a manger.

For John, the principal argument is that a new creation has been made possible, and it is one where God has found a home in each person-however lowly the person may be. John wasn't shy to alert us in his prologue that not everyone has accepted the gift of a new creation. But those who have accepted this gift, God has made it possible for them to be called God's children. And God's divine nature shines through in the lives.

There once was an Episcopal priest whose name is Philip Brooks. He served as a Chaplain during the civil war, burying many of his countrymen and women. That work load was so heavy that he decided to take a sabbatical and traveled to the holy land. On Christmas Eve, he borrowed a horse and rode from Jerusalem to Bethlehem. During the ride, he experienced what he described as an overwhelming presence of God.

Whilst in Bethlehem, he attended the Church of the Nativity for worship. This is what he wrote "I was standing in the old church in Bethlehem close to the spot where Jesus was born when the whole church was ringing hour after hour with the splendid hymns of praise to God."

Three years after his return, and as he reflected on the first Christmas in Bethlehem, he picked his journal and wrote down words to capture that moment. Those words became the carol "O' Little town of Bethlehem." These were his words of the last verse:

O holy Child of Bethlehem

Descend to us, we pray

Cast out our sin and enter in

Be born to us today

We hear the Christmas angels

The great glad tidings tell

O come to us, abide with us

Our Lord Emmanuel

The word that has been born in us and become flesh with us now dwells with us because we have created a space in the little mangers of our hearts. The birth of Jesus is like the gift of a sunrise—a sunrise that announces a new day with all its possibilities. Because of this sunrise, there is hope for a ruined humanity, hope of pardon and hope of peace with God.

The blessing of the gift of sunrise at Christmas is that we've each been given a gift more precious than we can possibly imagine – it's the gift that so many of us are craving – the gift of a loving, unconditional, nonjudgmental, everlasting relationship with a companion, our Lord Jesus Christ—who lies in a manger.

There's a story of a young man who painted a beautiful picture and put it on display at a local train station. But he added a note at the bottom of the canvas 'Please write down all the mistakes you see.' And then provided paper and pens for passersby to write down any mistake that they see. He returned later that evening and couldn't believe the notes people had left for him about the mistakes he made. This sent him into a depressive mood because some of the comments were unreasonably mean and harsh.

When he got home and showed his mother the notes, she too became very sad. But she comforted him and provided this new suggestion for him. She asked him to do the exact same thing, but this time, put a different note. This is the note 'Please correct any mistake you see.' And like the first time, he provided paper and pen. But when he returned in the evening, he saw no notes suggesting a correction.

The point is that many of the people who were able to point out the mistakes couldn't correct those mistakes themselves. It is easy for us to think that we are super human. We got it together. We don't make mistakes like other people. And some of the mean things were written by people who didn't know this person, had no connection to him, and didn't feel any sense of empathy for him.

It is the same with technology and this craze about dissociation. Dissociation is marked by disconnection from others, thoughts, sense of self, personal story or history. Dissociation not only thrives on the denial of death, but Silicon Valley is championing dissociation with the dream of a new creation, redesigning human nature, downloading the mind onto disembodied machines and reducing the soul to a datum. But the new creation from Silicon Valley is not interpersonal because everyone is busy on their phone and neglecting everyone.

There's no doubt that technology has enriched human lives and made life incredibly comfortable and convenient. You and I don't have to go to the mall or grocery store to shop. A mother of two rang the office doorbell a couple of days ago and when I picked up and asked if I could be of help, she said she was wondering if we could help her put some gifts under her Christmas tree for her kids. I buzzed her in and when she came into my office, I asked her for a list of things her kids wanted. We then went on Amazon and purchased all the stuff which could be delivered on Monday. She came by the office yesterday to pick the stuff for her kids.

But then she asked 'Is there anything that I can do for you?' 'No, I said. Just bring the kids to church.' I know that was presumptuous on my part.

But I also know that as fallible as the church has been and is, it is the only here, in the church, that we learn how to be human, how to connect and reconnect with people, it is only the church that teaches us about human dignity and decency, it is only here that we learn the true art of being co-creators with God. It is here that we learn the true value of perfect service in freedom. This is the place where we all get to learn that God made God's home in each of us and for that reason everyone is sacred.

Behind the incarnation is a story. And the heart of that story is the Christmas proclamation that every human being is the place where God chooses to dwell. It is to say that every human being has an inalienable dignity.

Think about it, you are the very place where God chooses to dwell. Every human being is a house of God- that is the affirmation of the season-Emmanuel - God in us, God with us. And because each of us is a house of God, we therefore do not have to desire God as if God were lacking in our lives, our redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but one of surrender.

Surrendering to the God who is:

Wonderful Counsellor born this night to quell our fear.

A Mighty God born this night to heal our brokenness.

An Everlasting Father born this night with a promise that is eternal.

A Prince of Peace born this night to gift our world rest from warfare, greed and violence.

This new born King shows us the way to love.

This new born King who cherishes us and leads us to life in all its abundance

Samuel Wells once wrote this *"We have been given this whole world- a playground of delight. We have been given time and space to grow and learn and experiment and discover. We have been given taste to relish, sight to dazzle, touch to treasure, hearing to enthral."*

We have been given beauty beyond value, music of the heavens, hearts to love and minds to ponder. We have been given a story that shows us where we fit into this great cosmic drama, a promise of companionship with God and a place at God's table forever. Yet, it seems so many people rush past this dazzling gift, seemingly unbothered by God, whose only purpose for existence is to be bothered about us!"

As you await to give and receive a gift this morning, remember that the reason we exchange gifts at Christmas is to mirror the greatest gift of all time to humanity – the gift of God becoming human in the form of a tiny fragile baby so that we might not only become vessels for the divine but we might become bearers of the fruit of the Spirit in our broken world.

And so this Christmas, I challenge you to speak to one person you find difficult or whose opinions you disagree with and to gift that person a slice of love, joy, peace, kindness, gentleness, or forgiveness; a gift that mirrors the life of the divine who is full of grace and truth. For the same God who has made His home in you tonight has made His home in that person. **Amen.**