

First Sunday after Christmas – Year A
December 29, 2019
Deacon Cindy Roehl
Church of the Good Shepherd, Dunedin, FL

- SERMON -

Have you noticed that just this weekend, in many homes and neighborhoods, the decorations have already come down? We have all been waiting a long time, and suddenly, for many, the day has come and gone. Ours is still here because, actually, the wise men haven't even arrived in the story of Jesus.

But for others, in a flash, the stable and manger have disappeared, and with them the donkey and cow and sheep. Everything has been swept clean and there is no sign of star or shepherds or angels or even of Mary and Joseph.

Shops have already begun stripping the Christmas decorations away, after Christmas sales have begun, and you may even notice a few tinsel bedraggled Christmas trees by the curb with the rest of the garbage. It all seems to be over sooner than it began.

For many, Christmas, if it is not **just** about Santa Claus, is **only** about a baby. To try to imagine Christmas without a baby is like trying to imagine it without Santa Claus.

But we are here, I hope, for the same reasons that John wrote his gospel and the author of the Epistle to the Galatians wrote the epistle. Neither of them make mention of the baby (and certainly neither of them make mention of Santa!) Unlike Matthew and Luke, John begins his gospel, not with the story of a baby, but with his great prologue which roots this Christmas festival in the very act of God's self-revelation to humanity.

God broke all the bounds of generosity when he sent Jesus into the world as a man: the Incarnation, this great gift of God. There's probably nowhere in scripture which proclaims with such magnificence this wonderful, generous gift of God out of his enormous love for us than the beginning of Saint John's gospel.

First it says, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word **was** God...*"

And then it says,

"And the Word (that Word – that was God) 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."

These words of John are surely some of the most luminous of the Bible: *...And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* In the old Latin rite these beginning verses from John were read at the end of every Mass. And all were to genuflect at these words: *Et verbum caro factum est.* And the Word became flesh—and dwelt among us. Words to be spoken on our knees.

John doesn't say the Word became a man or a body. He uses a quite startling and almost shocking word: *flesh*. Have you ever wondered about that? The Greek word *sarx*, to say without any doubt that in Jesus, God became flesh and blood just like us. In Jesus, God took on the totality of our humanity, which means that he was just like us in every way. He was shaped by a family like us. He grew and had to learn. Luke tells us that he **grew** in stature and in wisdom. He had the same emotions that we have. He knew pain. He knew anger. He knew anxiety, and he needed human affection - as we do.

For me, this is incredibly important, the fact that he experienced everything that I experience. He knows how I feel and he knows my deepest thoughts, my deepest fears, my deepest hopes. It tells me, and this is **so** important for my life, that there is no part of my life which I cannot bring to Jesus in prayer.

Psalm 139 says - *You have searched me, LORD, and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you, LORD, know it completely.* Psalm 139:1-4 (NIV)

The Bible reminds us over and over again of the comfort and peace that comes from being known and loved by God. We are truly known and perfectly loved, even more clearly and truly than we know and love ourselves!

I think when I was first a Christian my prayers were probably very pious. I used to pray about the sort of things I thought God wanted to hear. I think I censored an **awful lot**. As I've grown in the Christian faith, as I've come to understand this deep mystery of the Incarnation, that God loves me **so much** that he longs for me to bring *every part* of myself to God in prayer, even the parts that I'm not particularly proud of or that I don't like to actually think about myself. God says "Bring them to the surface. Bring them to the light, into my presence, and allow me to transfigure and redeem everything that you are. That is how much I love you."

Since God knows us better than we even know ourselves, we are free to take a deep breath, open our hands, and with humble hearts say to God, "Even in the midst of chaos and great pain, I trust that you know my deepest need. So, I won't try and run past you or tell you what's best. I choose to instead acknowledge my limitations and weakness, trusting that you are always working for my good."

So perhaps some questions we might ask today are "How honest am I in my prayers?", and then secondly to perhaps hear God's invitation to bring the deepest parts of our humanity up to his unwavering love, that we might be **healed** and **redeemed** and **set free**. That is how much God loves us.

Healed and redeemed and set free. With the New Year approaching it's good to reflect on previous occasions when this time meant more to some than to others. I know many of you may have special plans for this New Year's Eve. You've got your reservations made, got your outfits picked out, and you're amped.

But one New Year's Eve gives something special to reflect on. December 31, 1862. African Americans were awaiting a special event on the following morning when on January 1, 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation would go into effect. These people who had been slaves for so many years, many having been mistreated by their masters. They awaited with special anticipation of being free. FREE! No more in bondage. Free.

Some of us may be enslaved today. Enslaved to addictions, wrong treatment by others, wrong priorities. If you knew that January 1, 2020 would be the end of your slavery, that you would be free, how would you spend New Year's Eve? Would you still go out and party? Would you join with your family and loved ones to watch the evening pass in prayer and quiet anticipation? Would you be on your knees, or celebrating with gala celebration?

To be totally honest in our prayers, and experiencing God's love, and be healed and redeemed and set free.

Oh my, if we work on just this, what an amazing year 2020 will be...

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