

Sermon – Christmas Day 2015

The Intimacy of the Christ Child

And the Word became flesh and lived amongst us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. The season of waiting my friends is over. Advent that time of preparation has ended and today we celebrate the feast of the birth of Jesus Christ. What had come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. We can only imagine that Mary and Joseph must have felt such relief that their child had been born healthy and that Mary survived. Their long season of preparation and journey was over as well. A new chapter of their lives was to begin, a chapter that would involve coming to know their new son more intimately.

I don't have children myself but I was privileged to spend my pastoral care residency with many moms, dads and newborn babies at NYP Columbia. I was the chaplain to the ante partum unit, the birthing suite and the 80-bed Neonatal ICU. Many of the women in the ante partum unit were on bed rest, some staying on the unit for weeks and sometimes months as they patiently waited for their child to grow enough to be born with less risk. If they got to the crucial 24-week mark it meant that resuscitation of the newborn was an option, which provided much relief. It was hard for these women not to worry as they lay in bed whiling away countless hours. It was an emotional roller coaster for the whole family.

In a few cases I walked a longer road with these families from the ante partum unit, to the birthing suite then to the NICU where their child might reside for a few weeks, months and in one case a year. As we walked the road of the young baby's life our pastoral relationship deepened and I found I was allowed further in to the intimacy of their family life. They opened themselves up emotionally and spiritually. They shared their concerns, their anxieties, their joy and their faith, or lack of it, as we sat or stood for many hours around the baby's isolette. The road was often bumpy. Where the health of the baby went so did the emotions of the family.

The intimacy that I was afforded by these families was a profound experience, an experience that transformed me and has made me a better person. Intimacy comes you see from both an emotional and physical closeness, an openness to share and to learn about what's happening deep within our souls.

The physical closeness came from standing with those families around the isolette watching intently every breath, every heartbeat, and hearing every beep from the monitors. It came from witnessing the spirit of the child develop, as they endured sometimes endless surgeries and medical interventions that supported their young life.

The emotional closeness came as I helped the parents, grandparents and siblings express their feelings and spirituality as they journeyed with their child. Praying for them and giving voice to their relationship with God which often changed as they moved from anger and uncertainty to joy and hope.

Most often these babies made it home but sometimes they didn't.

Intimacy is something that we need to learn. For most of us it is something that is modeled for us by our parents and grandparents, something that we intuitively respond to. The more

intimate the family dynamic the more likely a child will be able to develop intimacy in their own relationships. If the parents can't model intimacy it has been proven that their children will struggle to develop intimacy in their lives.

Our modern society tends to associate intimacy just with sexual relations. A simple example of this was reactions I saw on Twitter this week about a scene from a Folgers Coffee commercial. The scene showed a Christmas reunion between a brother and sister and a tender moment where the sister puts a bow on her brother and claims him as her present. The reactions were of disgust and awkwardness at this tender moment between two human beings. Intimacy in its purest sense needs to be understood as a distinct human biological need that is at the core of our being.

Our created selves need intimacy as part of our lives. Intimacy affords us a level of emotional connection with each other that for me is God given and makes us the unique human creatures we are, capable of developing close bonds with our family members and friends that transcend our other desire for autonomy. When we open our selves up to intimacy we also risk being hurt, we risk rejection and exposure of such a deep part of our being that it can scare us. The fear we might experience might overcome us and prevent us from experiencing this deep emotional connection.

On this Christmas morning we come together in worship to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Christ child, the incarnate God. We come together each year because of our need to be reminded of this child's birth, to be reminded of the passage of God coming into the world in human flesh, the birth of the opportunity for an intimate relationship with Jesus, our Lord.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph journeyed to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, as required by their government. Exiled from the comforts of the inn the Christ child was born amongst the dank smells and noise of the animal shelter. Jesus came into the world, was wrapped and laid in the straw of that manger. What joy and relief must have filled Mary and Joseph seeing their healthy child born and breathing after such a journey. Like any newborns parents we can imagine them drawing close to the child, gazing down on him, filled with hope and expectation of God's favor. What curiosity might have filled their hearts as well, as they understood their child was a child of God and was called to be a light for the world.

The Christ child was born to bring salvation to this fractured world. Jesus was to be a healing balm for the world, a person to bring restoration between God and God's people. Jesus was to become the embodiment of peace and reconciliation with God and was to model intimacy in his relationship with God and the world. This model of relationship was to be the model of salvation that Jesus offered the world. Salvation you see was and is for all people because we have all drifted in our relationship with God, or we have separated from God to follow our own desires for autonomous living.

Jesus calls us into an intimate relationship with him. To experience the intimacy of this relationship we have to begin by saying yes. We have to begin by letting go of self-reliance and trust that a relationship with the living God will transform us into better people.

Jesus exposed his inner love for all people as he sought to get closer emotionally to people, to touch their hearts and to teach them by example how God calls us to live together. The invitation stands today as it did on the day Jesus was born. This anniversary we celebrate today affords us another reminder of this invitation. This day matters.

Our reaction to this invitation, to an intimate relationship with God through a deeper understanding of Jesus, can fill us with fear, can make us uncomfortable and cause us to reject or put off starting down the road of this relationship. I feel that these reactions, which I felt for many years, arise in us because we try to protect ourselves from the hurt or the risk of personal transformation. A number of people have said to me that they believe they are just fine as they are and happy with their lives. But in all honesty, from my experience with families in crisis, this state of being autonomous crumbles in the face of such crisis.

For some it can be incredibly hard to say yes to the journey toward intimacy with anyone, let alone this man Jesus. As parents will attest this journey of developing a deeper relationship is gradual. The child seeks to know, and seeks to be known at the same time. A truly intimate relationship is two-way. Curiosity helps us to be open to the experience of opening our hearts to the other. If we are curious about our friends maybe they will reciprocate and be curious about us. Curiosity leads us to discover the essence of the other and helps us form these deeper bonds. The journey of discovery can be as exciting and self-fulfilling as any other experience we can have on this earth.

Luke tells us that the shepherds' reaction to the angel announcing the birth of Jesus was one of fear. I think I'd react the same way if an angel appeared before me, but then their curiosity took over and it was this reaction that led them to Bethlehem and to their meeting the Christ child in all his innocence. Mary was curious as well as she pondered the story the shepherds told her of their experience. How she must have been putting two and two together realizing God's plan was being fulfilled in her midst.

On this Christmas morning as we celebrate the birth of Jesus you too might be feeling fear as you contemplate these words and your experience of being here. You might feel fear as you contemplate the invitation Jesus extends to each of us to come closer and to know him more intimately. We might fear being transformed by this relationship. Let us think though of Mary's experience and the experience of the shepherds where their fear was overcome by curiosity, which led them into a deeper and more fulfilling relationship with God, through this person Jesus. They came to a place of peace and joy.

My friends this morning I invite you to say yes, and to walk with us together as we all seek to learn more about Jesus over the coming year. I invite you to deepen your relationship with Jesus by becoming curious about his life and his ethic of living in intimacy with God. Together we can explore the stories of the witnesses of Jesus life, see how others have been transformed and have experienced Jesus. In going deeper we will come to know the living God and to be known. We will come into the peace of reconciliation and salvation.

Amen