

Sermon – Christmas 1

The radiance of the Christ Child

In my Christmas Day message I spoke of my experience as a chaplain to moms, dads and families in the ante-partum unit and Neonatal ICU at NYP Columbia. I spoke of the fear and anxiety moms and dads faced as they waited, often for many weeks, for the birth of their child. The journey was often very emotionally taxing as they responded to various crisis in the health of mom or the child as they tried to wait patiently. Then often as the baby was born they faced many weeks with their child in the NICU as he or she fought to grow, to heal and to be reunited with Mom. These days were often dark and traumatizing for these young families.

I also spoke of the intimacy of pastoring to these families as I journeyed with them through the dark days and into the light, if even for a fleeting moment. Sometimes the death of a child brought a dark pall over the families, over the staff and over me. In some cases it felt God was a far from that place as was possible. But then I reminded myself that God came in the care and comfort that we all brought to the grieving families, a small flicker of light in what was the darkest night for these parents.

Our lives are full of dark and light moments. This is natural and a cycle of living that we can't escape no matter how we might try. We can't escape the fear and anxiety of the dark times even as we try to protect ourselves by trying to control every aspect of our lives. Sometimes life just sucks and we can't but surrender into the pain and the seeming isolation of bad news.

The feast of the birth of Jesus that we celebrate during this season is, if we allow it, an invitation into an intimate relationship with God. We all have a need for emotional and physical closeness to someone. As much as that can fill us with fear, intimacy is something we all need in our lives to make them fulfilling. The need for intimacy is I believe at the core of our creation and contains therein the seeds of this small vulnerable Christ child. God within us is that small flicker of our humanity that responds to the needs of the world, the needs of the lonely, the needs of the vulnerable, the needs of the powerless.

The prologue to the gospel according to John that is our gospel reading for today is a profound witness of the coming into the world of God in human flesh, through the person Jesus the Christ. What was born of Mary was a life filled with the light and life of God, that flicker of the divine that is at the heart of all humanity. God emptied God's self to be born as a vulnerable child, dependent on his parents for everything. But grew to recognize the intimate relationship with God that was contained within him.

John's use of the metaphor of light in the dark has resonated down through the ages and is for me the most wonderful way of imagining God's son's birth, and the birth of the church as the spirit of God working in the world. One candle burning in a dark room barely illuminates the room and can be swiftly snuffed out by a breeze. Many candles burning in a room illuminate the whole room and rarely can be snuffed out by a breeze.

Light pushes away the darkness, pushes it far enough away so that we can live. We need light to live. Even as the world appears dark and fearful at the present time, light is what we celebrate when we come together, when we find deep human intimacy in the connection with and caring for those in need. Many fear the light for light exposes the dark hearts of people everywhere. We can shield our eyes from the light or we can walk towards it and bath in its warmth and beauty.

Jesus was born to be a light for the world, to be a beacon for us to walk toward so that we can live without fear, in the full warmth and light of his love. God desires us not to be afraid of coming in closer, of finding a deeper intimacy with Jesus.

God sent Jesus into the world to free us from living under the discipline of the law. No longer was adherence to the law a prerequisite to a relationship with God. However, this freedom granted to us by God also gave us more responsibility, as freedom required us to make a choice to develop a deeper relationship with God through Jesus. Our freedom calls us to the responsibility of saying yes, of curiosity to learn more about Jesus, to continue to grow in community and in intimacy with Jesus. God loved us so much that he came in Jesus to model this way of living and way of knowing.

Therefore growing into a deeper relationship with Christ requires some effort on our part. Staring as I said with saying Yes, as Mary said yes to the angel and agreeing to carry the baby. When we say yes God will do the rest. Staying open and curious to the working of the Holy Spirit within you is all that is needed. Staying curious will dilute the fear that comes with surrender and transformation.

Fear and rejection are also free responses to the invitation of God to a deeper relationship. Turning away from the light leads us to darkness. The darkness can be manifested as isolation, as fear, as autonomy, as the relentless pursuit of money or power, of injustice and greed. It is a choice away from the warmth and witness of the light, of deeper personal connection.

Jesus calls us back from the darkness and provides the benefit of the light in the world. As one light by ourselves we only will have limited ability to make a difference. But as a church gathered throughout the world we are a massive light that continues to radiate into all the dark places, in an effort to draw people out of the darkness and into the light, out of isolation and into relationship.

God's incarnation into the world in Jesus gave the world a man that modeled what it should be like to live in the world justly and peacefully. God wants nothing more than to be known to us through God's grace, love and peace, justice and right living. The inherent Christ child in each of us is the seed of the living God. It requires some nurture and light to bring it into the fullness of spirit that God desires.

"From God's fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known."

Won't you come closer to God by accepting the invitation of Jesus to develop a deeper and more intimate relationship with him. Won't you say Yes now this day and with a curious heart be more open to the possibility of being a brighter light of Jesus in the world.

Amen