

Sermon – Christmas Day 2016 – Cathedral of the Incarnation

John 1:1-14

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 (v14).

The world in which we live is constantly changing. As each moment passes in our lives the world moves forward powered by the regenerative energy of creation. The present, fleeting as it is, becomes the past in an instant. The future is always before us to bear upon us and to shape our lives. In the remembering of the past we bring events back to the present so that they can shape us and transform us, otherwise why would we remember.

When each of us was born we were born with the power to change the world. The world is different because we each exist and will change again when we die. Our lives impact the world much like the butterfly effect in chaos theory. Broadly, chaos theory says when a butterfly flaps those ever so delicate wings as it flies from plant to plant in one part of the world, a hurricane can be created in another. Each child's life definitely matters and each child's life impacts the world by impacting us.

Back in 1972 my cousin Colleen gave birth to her second child. Colleen was my closest cousin, the daughter of my mother's sister. I was just old enough to understand what was happening and to share in the joy of my cousins impending child. A few days after Bradley was born I overheard my mother on the phone speaking to her sister. Something was up. A few more days past before I came to understand that not all was well with Bradley and that he had been diagnosed with Down Syndrome. His mother, a devout Roman Catholic, was shattered and was considering giving him up to social services. Our families were deeply impacted by this crisis. In the end Colleen and Jim decided not to give Bradley up and started the process of learning how to care for and raise a disabled son. Bradley was the light of their lives and throughout his 21 years of life he shaped a lot of lives, mine included.

Another child Bayan Mohammad is also changing the world today. Bayan was recently featured in a news article in the NY Times. Bayan is 10 years old and a refugee from Syria who has recently settled in Toronto, Canada. She is one of four siblings who with their mom and dad arrived in Toronto a year ago. Their parents had prepared themselves and the children for a hostile welcome, knowing how many in the west feel about refugees, especially those from Syria. In Canada though, a trial program matched each family with a private sponsor who worked closely with the family to help them integrate into their community. Bayan was young enough to embrace her new life almost without fear and the article reported on the transformation the family was experiencing because of how Bayan was being transformed herself through the intense and intimate integration program. The strict Muslim family culture, developed over centuries in Syrian families was being challenged as Bayan and her siblings moved around in this new more liberal western culture. Bayan and her siblings were the heart of the family but her parent's struggled to flourish as they stood between two disparate cultures.

Mary was a young girl too, not much older than Bayan, when she was visited by the angel Gabriel who told her she'd be blessed with this new child without having sexual relations with her betrothed. Initially perplexed by this news, Mary acquiesced after learning her cousin Elizabeth had become pregnant in her old age through being blessed by God. This news for Mary started the process of transforming her life, and that of her husband Joseph. Joseph, like my cousin, was initially unsure of what to do and whether to accept the child. He thought it best to quietly uncouple his wagon from Mary and allow her to face the shame of her pregnancy alone. After further celestial encouragement he agreed to stay and support Mary and raise this new child.

Every day there are about 350,000 babies born in our world. Most of these babies live and many grow to lead average lives in their communities. A few will become leaders in their communities and some leaders in their countries. Some will become wealthy whilst others will become poor. Some will be transformative scientists or technology revolutionaries whilst others will grow fruit and vegetables so we can eat.

We often say that a new born or young child is the light of our lives, implying that the child, this small fragile dependent being, somehow gives us purpose and meaning. Many of you will know that feeling. The child becomes light in that they manage to deepen our emotions and maturity as we watch them grow and develop. All these children will impact the world by their lives through the light that they cast.

Each year in our retelling of the miraculous birth of Jesus we remember this unique child, and how he came into the world to rescue us from ourselves. Jesus was unique in that he carried "the exact imprint of God's very being," the writer of Hebrews says, and that "he sustains all things by his powerful word." God emptied God's self of this divine power and became fully human in Jesus, to fulfill the prophecy of old that God would come into the world to save us.

Our gospel reading for this Christmas Day, acknowledges the sameness of God and the Word, Jesus. God, incarnate in Jesus, was life, life in its fullest sense, and this life was the light of the world. Jesus later taught the meaning of life when we gave us the great commandment to "love God with all of our hearts, and to love our neighbor as ourselves." This light, Jesus the Christ child, was the light to enlighten everyone John says, and all who receive him and believe in his name will be given power to become children of God and will inherit life in its fullest.

One small vulnerable child, born in a dank manger to an itinerant young unwed couple grew to transform the world and so transforms us. Through our transformation we can continue to transform the world, the never-ending cycle of new creation. Pope Francis said recently that "God's way of salvation is based on transformation not exclusion. God's way of salvation is based on love and forgiveness which is meant to heal us, not to punish and reject us."

In the midst of our retelling of this Christmas story for this year, and the remembering of the birth of Jesus, we as a Christian community learn how Jesus transforms the world by transforming us. We are called to be the light and salt for a broken world, to be the leaven in the bread. The ripples of Jesus birth started moving out from the manger almost immediately. From the humblest shepherds to the wealthiest wise men and kings, the world was transforming because of this young baby.

God has come amongst us in human flesh and we surrender if we can, to change our ways, continually standing in the present washed clean by the grace of God, facing a future together where we can work to bend the arc of the moral universe towards justice, as Dr Martin Luther King Jr. preached.

The joy for us as we gather together this morning to remember and celebrate this child's birth is that the light that is Jesus, is now the light that shines from us. We are transformed by this light into the children of God and thus, we are continuing to transform the world into a better place for each other.