

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Sunday, December 18, 2022

The Fourth Sunday of Advent

Solemn Eucharist

11 a.m.

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A Sermon by

The Rev. Canon Carl Turner, *Rector*

on

Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

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Tales of the unexpected: Heaven and Earth in a Little Space

There was once an elementary school that had an old tradition that, on a teacher's birthday, every child in the class would bring their teacher a special gift. As the children progressed through the school, the teachers discovered who gave the best gifts and looked forward to it immensely. It was the sixth-grade teacher's birthday, and she had been with the school for many years and was deeply loved. Her birthday always came just before Christmas, so she particularly loved this old tradition.

Anna's mother owned a flower shop, so Anna gave the teacher some beautiful flowers.

Robert's parents owned a candy shop. Robert gave the teacher a wonderful box of assorted chocolates.

Frankie's mum owned a bakery. Frankie gave the teacher the most exquisite birthday cake.

The other children brought their gifts, and then it was little Johnny's turn. The teacher looked forward to his gift the most because Johnny's dad owned the liquor store! Johnny brought in a big box for his teacher. When little Johnny handed the box to his teacher, she noticed that the bottom of the box was wet. So, she put her finger on it and tasted.

"Oh Johnny – I wonder what it is this year? Is it wine?" she asked.

"No, it's not wine!" Johnny replied.

She tasted it again. "HMMMMMM. Is it that very expensive single malt whisky that your dad knows I like?"

"Nope, it's not whisky?!" said Johnny.

She tasted it again and was puzzled. "Well, Johnny, I give up. What is it?"

"It's a puppy!" said Johnny!

You never know what to expect! At the service of the Blessing of the Crèche yesterday, Fr. Schultz read the children Tolstoy's famous Russian folk tale of Papa Panov, who so wanted to meet Jesus on Christmas Day, and thought he had missed him, only to discover that Jesus had been visiting him throughout the day in the poor, the hungry, and the homeless – to which papa Panov had responded with love and devotion.

The Collect for the Fourth Sunday of Advent is simple and direct: *"Purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son our Lord cometh he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself."* At the beginning of Advent, we thought about Christ's second coming. Now, in these latter days of Advent, we think about his first coming at Bethlehem. But the collect prays that that we may be made pure by his *daily* visitation. When Jesus Ascended to his heavenly Father after his Resurrection, he was not abandoning his people; Jesus said to his disciples that he would be with them *always* to the end of the age and, through the gift of his Holy Spirit, he made it possible for you and for me to recognize his presence in so many ways – through the reading of the scriptures; through prayer; through the sacramental life of the church, and especially in the Holy Eucharist and the sacrament of his body and blood. But Jesus also comes to us in unexpected ways. In 2023, we shall work our way through the Gospel of Matthew, and in Matthew's Gospel we find that very parable that is at the heart of the tale of Papa Panov and the heart of today's collect. *"Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?' And the king will answer them, 'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'" (Matthew 25:37-40)*

Purify our consciences by thy daily visitation.

We live in a world and in an age when it seems so difficult to imagine the Lord coming to visit us, and yet Jesus himself told us to look for him. This incredulity is not new – In our Old Testament lesson, a faithful King Ahaz is offered the chance to ask for any sign of hope and yet, he cannot bring himself to ask. Instead, the prophet tells him of a mysterious sign – the virgin's child who shall be named Emmanuel – God with us. In our Gospel reading, Joseph was struggling with the crushing news of Mary's pregnancy, only to be told by the Angel that this was the action of God's Holy Spirit, and that the child is to be named *Jesus* which means Savior. Even when that birth came to fruition, it is significant that there was no room for God in the inn. No room; no imagination; no possibility that things could change.

Emmanuel: God with us: Savior - just when people thought that the world was beyond redemption, God entered into that world and into the very fabric of what he had created. God made himself small in the womb of Mary in order that we might become more like him, in whose image we are all made.

I love the little secret prayer that is spoken by the priest when he or she puts the drop of water in the chalice of wine at the offertory – *"By the mystery of this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ, who came to share in our humanity."*

Purify our consciences by the daily visitation, Emmanuel – God with us – Savior.

When we open our hearts and our minds to the possibilities afforded by God, we become just a little bit like Mary and Joseph – we recognize the presence of God in our midst.

In the Hebrew scriptures, God is often portrayed as fearful, and sometimes even vengeful, so that the response to meeting him is to do abasement. The paradox of the Christian faith, that we are about to proclaim at Christmas, is that our God chose to humble *himself* so that we might live; to abase *himself*; or as St. Paul puts it, to make himself, as it were, a *slave*.¹ The old 15th English Christmas Carol puts it so beautifully, describing Mary as the virtuous Rose, *"For in this rose contained was Heaven and earth in little space."*

Where are our own 'little spaces' in our daily lives?

The irony of all of this is that we, who had distorted the image of God within each one of us, now has that image restored by God who assumed our own mortal nature. And, my friends, when we open ourselves up to that kind of possibility, we become more perfect images of the one who created us. When we recognize Jesus not just in the host at mass, but in the lives of those we meet in the street, we become more like him

who is called Emmanuel – God with us. Archbishop Rowan Williams, when he preached at Walsingham, explored this idea that by opening ourselves up to God we become more alive, not less, because we have the chance to become more like God, in whose image we are made, rather than diminishing ourselves; by being consumed by God, we become more fully human. Rowan Williams said this: “*As Mary gives room to God, God makes her greater. What could be a more vivid illustration of how wrong and silly it is to think that God and humanity are somehow in competition? As if the more God there were, the less humanity there could be. But when Mary gives room to God, God gives room to her: her humanity blossoms into its fullest glory.*”²

My dear friends, we have a whole week before we celebrate once again the mystery of the Word made flesh at Christmas. As we prepare to celebrate his birth in Bethlehem, let us pray that we may not be so distracted by our Christmas preparations, that we inadvertently miss him when he comes to visit us this week.

We beseech thee, Almighty God, to purify our consciences by thy daily visitation, that when thy Son our Lord cometh he may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹. See Philippians 2:1-11

². *Sermon preached by the Archbishop of Canterbury at the National Pilgrimage to the Shrine of our Lady of Walsingham, Monday, May 31, 2004.*