

SAINT THOMAS CHURCH

Fifth Avenue · New York City

Tuesday, December 24, 2024
Christmas Eve

Procession and Solemn Eucharist of the Nativity
(Midnight Mass)
10:30 pm

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A Sermon by
The Rev. Canon Carl Turner
on
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20
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Once you are real you cannot be ugly.

“What is REAL?” asked the Rabbit one day, when they were lying side by side near the nursery fender, before Nana came to tidy the room. “Does it mean having things that buzz inside you and a stick-out handle?”

“Real isn’t how you are made,” said the Skin Horse. “It’s a thing that happens to you. When a child loves you for a long, long time, not just to play with, but REALLY loves you, then you become Real.”

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit?” ^[1]

The Velveteen Rabbit by Margery Williams is one of my favorite stories that is loved by my young grandchildren. I am sure that you, too, have your favorite childhood stories that are, somehow, engrained deep within each one of you. The greatest fairy tales often have a kind of sadness about them – Oscar Wilde knew only too well that life could be cruel and humanity even crueler. In his story of the Happy Prince, we see the contrast between wealth and abject poverty. That story reveals what God sees as precious and it is shocking, for it is not the Mayor and his councilors in all their finery, building statues of themselves but, rather, a dead sparrow and a broken lead heart. Papa Panov, translated for us by Tolstoy, reminds us that homelessness and child poverty is at the heart of the Christmas story; last Christmas, 30,000 children in New York spent the night in municipal homeless shelters; this Advent, this church collected gifts for children and their mothers who will be hiding in a shelter for those suffering from domestic violence. Christmas certainly is a time of contrasts.

In 1967, when I was seven years old, I remember the very first time I was taken to the cinema; Walt Disney studios had re-released the film *Snow White*. I was captivated by it! The joy and the vibrancy of it all! But, of course, Disney does not tell the story in the way that the Brothers Grimm first wrote it, removing all those aspects that are shocking. In the original story, the evil Queen is forced to wear a pair of red-hot iron slippers and dance until she drops down dead. Cinderella also got a Disney makeover, for there are no step-sisters cutting off big toes and heels with knives so that they can wear the crystal slipper; and the brothers Grimm have the birds pecking out their eyes.

So many of our fairy stories are, indeed, dark, sad, and melancholy. Perhaps they tap into the dark melancholy that is felt by so many of us deep within, particularly at the Christmas season when there is the empty chair at the dinner table, or the depressing news we hear on the radio or see on our

television screens. This morning, I woke up to see images of a Christmas Tree in a Christian-majority town in Syria being burned down by extremists.

“Does it hurt?” asked the Rabbit.

“Sometimes,” said the Skin Horse, for he was always truthful. “When you are Real you don’t mind being hurt.”

“Does it happen all at once, like being wound up,” he asked, “or bit by bit?”

“You become. It takes a long time” said the Skin Horse. “Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop out and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don’t matter at all, because once you are Real you can’t be ugly, except to people who don’t understand.”

Once you are real, you can’t be ugly.

How sad that so many of us prefer to live in a fantasy world or, worse, how often, like Walt Disney Studios, do we excise from our lives those things we would rather people not know about; burying deep down within us those difficult memories, those darker moments of self-doubt, or even self-loathing?

My friends, this holy night is the antidote to all those kinds of feelings. This holy night, we tell the story that is not a fairy tale – but a story that helps us truly understand what it is to be real. This holy night, we are encouraged to be true to ourselves and to see the potential that God has for each one of us.

Where do we start?

With the words of our first lesson from Isaiah tonight: *“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”*

In our collective darkness, God comes to us. God comes to us in Jesus. And God comes to us in Jesus in order to experience all that it is to be human; all human emotions; all it means to live as well as to die.

Preaching on Christmas Day in 1977, when there was so much fear and darkness in El Salvador, Archbishop Oscar Romero said this: *“Everything we experience Jesus experienced: weariness, sadness, discouragement, loneliness, happiness, enthusiasm, friendship. Everything the human heart feels has been felt by God in Christ. That is why Christ is the revelation of humanity to human beings.”* ^[2]

Just think about that for a moment: **Christ is the revelation of humanity to human beings.**

We know that what we celebrate at Christmas is the birth of Emmanuel – a name that means *God is with us*; that the incarnation is about Jesus revealing *God* to us; God coming down to our level. That is why we many of us bow or even kneel when we read those words in the Nicene Creed. But we should also remember that the incarnation is also about God revealing *humanity* to us. That is, the true meaning of what it is to be made in God’s image. Jesus is the only person who at one and the same time reveals the glory of God *and* the glory of being fully human; fully alive! Think about it – Jesus is truly God but also truly human, so he is at one and the same time the perfect revelation of God to us and the perfect revelation of what humanity is called to be. This is at the heart of St. Irenaeus’ famous phrase *“the glory of God is the living man, and the life of man is the vision of God.”* ^[3] Jesus reveals God to

us and, in turn, reveals to God what it is to be truly made in his image; the incarnation allows us to participate in that relationship.

So, my friends, the Christmas story is no fairytale, though it certainly contains darker moments: Mary and Joseph have a long journey forced upon them by an overseas Emperor with no allowance given to the fact that Mary is heavily pregnant; when Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, there is no room for them in the inn – in any inn! They find themselves homeless as Mary goes into labor; there is even a wicked King – Herod the Great – who orders infanticide against his own race because he wants to destroy the child Jesus, forcing the Holy Family to flee to Egypt to become refugees and asylum seekers. But this is not a fairytale – it is a reality, and it should sound very familiar. I don't mean the Christmas story – I mean the story of so many people in our world today who experience all that the Holy Family experienced.

As Romeo said, *“Everything we experience Jesus experienced”*

And that brings us, my friends, to the message of the Angels this night. Angels, to me, seem to have a mischievous quality about them – or, perhaps, they just see things that we human beings so often fail to see because they spend their time close to God who is pure love, and know the potential deep within each one of us, made in God's image. I think if I were an Angel 2000 years ago, I might have chosen a more glorious place to share the good news – Jerusalem would have been a bit grander, after all, the Temple was a wonder of the world; or maybe Herod's palace; or maybe in *multiple* important places all over the inhabited world simultaneously! No, the Angels appear not to the rich and the powerful, not even to the religious leaders; they announce the news of the birth of the Savior to Shepherds in fields outside of Bethlehem. And what is the message of the Angels? You walked over it as you came in tonight – it is a mosaic in the center of our Narthex – have a look as you leave the church tonight. There, poignantly, at the center of what is a memorial to the Second World War which is itself a reminder of that darkness that humanity often prefers to live in, we find the message of the Angels: Peace on earth to men of goodwill.

Peace on earth to men of goodwill.

What do the Shepherds do? They immediately go to Bethlehem to seek out Jesus. And they find Jesus, with Mary and Joseph, and it changes their lives for they return, we are told, *“glorifying and praising God.”*

This Christmas, we are invited to hear the message of the Angels and to seek Jesus who is the light not just for our world, but for you and for me. *My light in my darkness.* The message of Christmas is an invitation to be true to myself and to be true to God in whose image I have been wonderfully made. Or, as Archbishop Rowan Williams put it so simply, *“God has spoken through a Son. He has called us all to become children at the cradle of the Son, the Word made flesh, so that we may grow into a glory that even the angels wonder at.”* ^[4]

References

- 1 From 'The Velveteen Rabbit' by Margery Williams, first published 1921
 - 2 Oscar Romero – Sermon preached in San Salvador Cathedral Christmas Eve 1979
 - 3 Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* 4.20.7, trans. Robert M. Grant, 'Irenaeus of Lyons'
 - 4 Rowan Williams – Sermon preached in Canterbury Cathedral Christmas Day, 2009
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