

Sermon for Christmas Eve
Grace Episcopal Church, Chattanooga, TN
11 PM Festival Eucharist, December 24, 2017
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*For he is our lifelong pattern, daily, when on earth he grew
he was tempted, scorned, rejected, tears and smiles like us he knew
Thus he feels for all our sadness, and he shares in all our gladness. (Hymn 102)*

In the Name of Christ Emmanuel, who is God with us. **Amen.**

In recent years I've often returned to a vignette from college when I lived in a campus ministry house with six other young adult Episcopalians. I wish I could say that it was the perfect utopia - but if you know what it's like to have two or three housemates, imagine having six all in their early twenties. We came into it with varied life experiences, expectations, habits, and personalities, and as in with family system, natural power dynamics and tensions emerged. Let's just say nothing will disillusion you to the idea of a harmonious, utopian, Christian community than trying to live in one. Truth be told, while we were really accomplishing some amazing ministry together, we often found it difficult to get along.

However, one day the tenor of the entire house began to change in an instant. I awoke early in the morning around noon and went in the bathroom to discover written on my mirror the words "You're looking like God today." I was feeling pretty disheveled that particular morning, and to be honest I wasn't sure what to make of it or whether I should take it as a compliment and be flattered or instead just be totally creeped out. But when I finally found the culprit - another housemate named Katie - it turned out that she'd actually snuck into all the residents' bathrooms because she wanted us each to remember above all, every single day, that we are created in the image of God.

Isn't that a beautiful word? Turn to your neighbor, really look them in the eye, and say "neighbor, you're looking like God tonight."

This became somewhat of a mantra for us, and it soon actually spread like wildfire across the campus. We started hearing accounts of students receiving encouraging text messages and others finding the phrase on

their dorm room doors. Student club leaders posted it on their bulletin boards, and a dance instructor who led self-esteem workshops with teenage girls wrote it on her ballet class mirror! Suddenly students all over campus were speaking about the goodness of God, and our little community was transformed and healed from the inside and out. All because of that simple phrase. "You're looking like God today."

You see, we can say that tonight because Christmas was not just a one time event 2,000 years ago. Rather, the mystery and miracle of Christmas is that God became flesh with us - for us - in us - so that all flesh - might be redeemed. To paraphrase scholars in the Eastern Orthodox tradition it's this idea that "God became human so that humans might become divine." In our kind of churchy theological jargon you may know that we call this the mystery of the "incarnation" - think carnal or if you enjoy Mexican food perhaps carne asada - God incarnate, God enfleshed, the carnal God.

A kinda snarky classmate of mine once suggested that the idea that the Almighty, Omnipotent, Creator God of the Universe could and would raise his Son from the dead is rather common throughout ancient and modern mythologies and frankly - not that impressive. But the idea that God would become incarnate - really, truly human - made of flesh and earth? And not just a costume or a magic trick or an illusion - but the real deal? Well talk about a weird religion.

This holy child born of Mary, while completely without sin, was by no means without limitations. Born into the most humble and vulnerable of circumstances, the Lord of the universe

came into the world impoverished and without a home as his parents sought refuge as religious minorities in a time of political unrest in the Greco-Roman Empire. Sound familiar? He was utterly dependent on his parents, and, far from a silent night, as a baby he would have cried, spit, laughed, and dare I say from the pulpit - pooped. It's pretty crude if not altogether scandalous.

As he grew he would turn tables in anger at the temple, weep at the loss of his Lazarus his friend, experience betrayal by one of his own, and finally die a bitter death in a humiliating public state execution - and after three days rise to life again though not without scars from the wounds of nails that pierced his hands and his side. This child now wrapped in swaddling clothes will later be wrapped in bands of linen. The mother who held him in her arms by the manger would later hold him at the cross. This may not sound like such good news but do you understand what this means? There's nothing we can go through that God cannot empathize with.

Indeed, perhaps as vulnerable as any child are the parents - in this case the Divine Father God, the earthly mother Mary, the adoptive step-dad Joseph the Carpenter - each from their own vantage point embracing the risk of bringing new life into the world and caring for it in all its need and frailty - with all the uncertainties of what is to come and what to expect but knowing all too well that one day the child might experience suffering and heartbreak that no one can bear for them - for even the sinless one could not evade the trials and hardships of this harsh and often unforgiving world in which so many variables are completely out of our control.

And yet during the holidays it seems we go to such great lengths to convince ourselves otherwise through our efforts to curate the perfect Hallmark Christmas. We prepare the manger, write the cards, search for the perfect gifts, go at length to bake, decorate, wrap, and mail. The choir rehearses, and the young priest agonizes over crafting the perfect sermon. We do our best to maintain peace with family so that for just a few days, hours, moments - everything can feel right with the world.

Yet sooner or later, after the carols are sung and the gifts unwrapped, we must go back into the world where we are again disillusioned of any fantasies about peace on earth and goodwill towards men: ISIS, the catastrophe in Aleppo; disturbing climate issues (Australia), lead ridden water sources - talks of nuclear arms, bigotry and hatred in our cities and schools, poverty, famine, and disaster in every corner of the earth, even the very Bethlehem where Jesus was born today is hemmed in by a 20 foot wall and surrounded Israeli-state settlements - In our individual lives so many of us face illnesses, financial burdens, family strife, and personal struggles with no quick or easy fix.

In the Christmas story, neither does God offer us easy fixes - Instead God offers us a child - a relationship, a new and hopeful way of being in the world. And this child fully divine and fully human - This child doesn't wait on the perfectly curated Christmas to be born but enters into the messiness and chaos of a world utterly out of control - at least out of our control. Because ultimately Christmas isn't something we must make for ourselves. Rather it is a gift to be received when we have the courage and humility to open our hearts, open our eyes and see it.

So tonight may we have the grace to let go for just a moment and just be. What is done is done. What is not done, may we just let go as we breathe deeply, enjoy the glorious music and greenery in this space and join our hearts and voices to the angels and shepherds above and below who hasten to the manger even while others sleep. ‘

For the promise of Christmas is this: The glory of God has been revealed, and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God.

St. Irenaeus - one of the early Church Fathers - once described this “glory of God” as a human being fully alive. Likewise in Christ child we see the divine one fully awaked to the full richness of human experience calling us all to embrace our life to the fullest, remembering that there is no height or depth or breath we can traverse where Christ does not journey with us. There is no

brother or sister or creature we can encounter who is beyond God's embrace. For our incarnate, carnal, God was made flesh so that in the end all flesh might be know life and peace; freedom and joy.

And if all means all, then this promise also points to our call to be agents of reconciliation in this broken and fragmented world. Can you envision the dream that God dreams?

White and black

Native, latino, and asian -

Young and old and young at heart

broken and abused

wrinkled flesh or scarred, blemished

Disabled and athletic, LGBT,

Christian and muslim and jewish and buddhist and hindu

Republican and democrat

Rich and poor, working, unemployed, underemployed and retired Tired flesh or tattooed, tall, short, lean, or stout

housed and unhoused, Meat eating and vegan..

Fearful flesh and materialistic, joyful and regretful

Grieving flesh and celebrating, guilty, and optimistic

Hopeful flesh and sad, naive, jaded, despairing, beautiful, complicated:

Wherever you are, whoever you are, The glory of God has been revealed, and all flesh will see the salvation of our God! This is God's promise; this is our call.

Dear people of Grace, I see it in you - in your compassionate hearts, warm hospitality, genuine empathy, and spirit-filled joy. And in the disarming light of this baby boy you're looking an awful lot like God tonight. So I invite you once more to take an honest look in the mirror. Who do you see? What do you see? I ask because the person you see when you take off all the masks

and have the courage to really look - that's the person God loves. That's the flesh that Christ redeems. That's the one in whom he lives.

Even in our weaknesses; especially in your weaknesses. Even in your imperfections; especially in your imperfections. Even in your scars;

especially in your scars. God yearns to be made flesh in us, that the world may know God's redeeming love and glory. . May we feel this redeeming love deep in our hearts this night and be strengthened through God's presence to bear that love to the world.

For truly my friends, Christ himself is our mirror and our light. May we we hasten to the manger to gaze upon this child - that we may find our home in him and that he may be born again, in us.

Amen.