

Deacon Eric Johnson
Christ Eve 2014
Luke 2: 1-20
God With Us

- ✘ My memory is very leaky and porous: five foreign languages I was familiar with (if not fluent) are all washed away; sermons I've heard and given have been replaced by more important information. Even Carol's sermon of two weeks ago has been over-written by the apparently-more-important loop of the lyrics of Gilligan's Island.
- ✓ But there are things I do remember, like the statement made 35 years ago by a Greek Orthodox priest who presented a seminar at an Adult Formation class at St. George's Episcopal Church in Belleville IL
 - He made the observation that we could understand the differences between the different Christian denominations
 - when we realize that different denominations focus on different parts of the story of Jesus
- ✓ Christianity, he said, is divided by which central story defines their faith
 - Roman Catholics and Evangelicals are centered on Good Friday
 - Atonement; scourging at the pillar; crowning with thorns, the cross; the blood, crucifixes
 - Orthodox are centered on Easter
 - The Resurrection, the next life, orthodox mass as the thin place between this world and the next; icons as windows through which we can see into the resurrected world
 - Episcopalians are centered on Christmas
 - Not so much in gift-giving; but in the incarnation
 - ◆ The belief that God became human, or incarnate. [The word "incarnate" comes from the Latin "Carnis" (meat/flesh); carne, as in "chili con carne."]
- ✘ Episcopalians, he said, are deeply aware of that moment in history—when God entered the world and the Word was made flesh.
- ✓ At that moment, God affirmed what was said in the 1st Chapter of Genesis, that God created the world and the world was good.
- ✓ And, given that, we affirm the goodness of life in this world and believe that the body and the material reality around us are fundamentally good.
 - God blessed the world when he sent his Son to live as part of creation
 - And we, in turn, are meant to live in harmony with creation and with God.

- ✘ Like all attempts to divide the world into two or three parts (lumpers and splitters, fighter pilots and bomber pilots), this ignores many of the levels of complexity by which we all understand our faith and our relationship to God and the world.
 - ✓ But I do think of myself as an Episcopalian Christmas person
 - ✓ Because the events surrounding the birth of Jesus form the way I see God and the way I see the world.
 - ✓ And I'll give just three examples of that relationship:
 - One is in the story of the shepherds, by which we come to understand that God *meets us where we are*
 - Another is in the phrase "Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart..."
 - And I'll come back to those in a moment,
 - Because most fundamentally, I understand my relationship to God and God's relationship to world in the phrase, "Fear not."

"Fear not"

- ✓ This is the phrase that the Angel Gabriel says to Zechariah, when the angel told him about the forthcoming birth of his son, John
 - This is the phrase spoken by the angel of the Lord to the shepherds abiding in the fields
 - This is the phrase spoken by Gabriel to Mary at the Annunciation of the birth of Jesus
 - ..."Fear not..."
- ✘ There are indeed many things to fear in this world
 - ✓ The struggle for dominance, or with loneliness, or with loss and sadness;
 - and its easy just to become paralyzed with the enormity of it all
- ✘ And yet, we can't stay frozen with fear as long as we have the story of Mary.
 - ✓ If anyone had the right to ask, "why me?" it was Mary: pregnant before she was officially married; obliged to travel to Bethlehem; child laid up in a manger
- ✘ But Mary did not despair
 - ✓ Because from the moment that the Angel Gabriel said, "Do not fear," Mary became empowered
 - She was able to respond to the Angel by saying, "Let it be done according to your will."
 - ✓ And she said this by her own authority alone; she did not have to consult with her father, or with Joseph, or her uncles.

- Because she did not fear, this was her decision, and no one else's.
- ✘ But not fearing, Mary became empowered,
 - ✓ despite the fact that she held no great position; that she was poor; she is an unmarried woman.
 - ✓ Yet, she knew, as the angel Gabriel told her, that she was loved by God, "The Lord is with you."
 - And that knowledge changed everything.

(God meets us where we are.)

- ✘ The shepherds watching their flocks by night heard the same phrase: "Do not fear"
 - ✓ And their part of the incarnation story reminds us that **God meets us where we are.**
- ✘ God could have revealed himself in many ways:
 - ✓ He could have come as a mighty ruler, who no shepherd could even dare to approach...
 - Or he could have come to us as a disembodied voice
- ✘ But in the story of Christmas we discover a God who is not distant or disembodied, but as someone who desires to be near to us.
 - ✓ God wants to meet us where we are. So he came as a human being that even shepherds could approach
 - In the story of the shepherds we learn that God wants to be able to relate to us in our own circumstances, in our work, in our daily lives.
 - By sending a multitude of the heavenly hosts to the shepherds, we are told that God will meet us at any time, even while we're at work.
- ✘ We don't have to be in church to have God communicate with us;
 - ✓ God often meets us in the midst of our busy lives.
 - ✓ God meets us where we are, and where we are is the place to meet God
- ✘ We don't have to wait until all the sheep are in the pen; or that our lives settle down or that we've overcome the sinful patterns of our lives or until we can pray better..."
 - ✓ The incarnation give us the realization that not only are we trying to find God; but that God is trying to find us.
- ✘ And the good news for us in our different circumstance is that where God finds us is not the same for all people.
 - ✓ For some: God will find us when working in a food bank

- ✓ For others: God will find us as we have conversations with close friends
- ✓ For others: God will find us in reading and reflecting on scripture
- ✓ For others: God will find us this this very place

(But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart)

- ✗ The most difficult part this arrangement is paying attention to God when he speaks to us.
 - ✓ Which brings us to the part of the story where “Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.”
- ✗ That is the big sin of my life:
 - ✓ God invites me to see him in the daily events of my life ...but often i just don’t notice...or I get caught up in the crush of business and fail to see what’s going on around me.
 - ✓ Men’s Group: highs and lows of the week. (those and where life is sucked out of us)...so that hopefully we’ll see a pattern and see more clearly where God is speaking to us and where God is pointing us.
 - By the time I get to Friday, I have a hard time remembering what happened on Thursday, much less last Saturday
- ✗ My life has become an endless series of tasks...a never-ending To-Do List. And I move from one to the next without thinking about how God is meeting me where I am.
 - ✓ And the Christmas season doesn’t help (social engagements, concerts, stuff that must be done before everyone takes off on Christmas break...)
 - ✓ It’s just a mad rush, and in the process I seem to have become, not a human being, but a human doer.
- ✗ That’s why I’m thinking—for maybe the 12th time in my life—that it’s time to start keeping a journal.
 - ✓ I’ve tried to do that, in fits and starts over the last 20 years, but I never get past about three entries and then it becomes just another item in the To-Do List.
- ✗ So rather than try—at the end of the day— to recall all the events of the day and list the good, the bad, and the ugly
 - ✓ I’m going to take a deep breath and just recall **one** event of the day; that either gave me great joy or great angst.
 - ✓ And maybe I’ll just write down two lines...and I’ll just “ponder that in my heart.”
 - I’m going to let his event just sit for a spell; Let is savor, like a piece of chocolate from Johnny Picasso’s
 - just pause to enjoy and contemplate that event in the hope that I can better understand how God is meeting me where I am.

- ✘ So my hope in the new year is that we can live up the expectations that that Orthodox priest had for us Episcopalians:
 - ✓ That we will live lives of incarnational spirituality
 - ✓ That we will notice where God is active in the world and active in our lives...not only in peak moments “when we experience a multitude of the heavenly hosts”
 - but also in those daily events in our lives when God is often overlooked.
- ✘ As Christmas people, I hope that we can continue to see God dwelling in real things, real places and real people.
 - ✓ Because as Christmas People, we do affirm that God is all around,
 - ✓ that God has blessed all of creation
- ✘ By virtue of the Incarnation, all of our lives are touched by grace
 - ✓ Everything that is human and everything that is in nature speaks to us of God
 - ✓ What matters for us as Christmas people is
 - how we care for all the gifts that God has given us
 - what do we do with all the gifts that God has given us.