



ST BART'S

A Sermon by

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Taking up the Baby Jesus

Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, December 28, 2014

The First Sunday after Christmas—Based on John 1:1-18

I had a hard time sleeping on the night of Christmas Eve. You would think I would have been ready to collapse. But no, after the multiple services that we held here at St. Bart's, which filled this space three times over with worship both grand and delicate, worship both timely and timeless. After all the reunions and the new faces, and a pageant that I swear gets more adorable every year, and after eating all of the candy and pastries that were lying around, I was wired. Even after getting home. My dog, Beauregard, was conked out, but I, it seems, was ready for anything but forty winks. And so I turned on the television to unwind. And, behold, more church. There was Pope Francis and eighty thousand others, in the glory that is St. Peter's in Vatican City. They had just finished their Christmas Eve service as well. I had never seen a Christmas service at St. Peter's before. They were actually at the closing procession, so I thought it was going to end there. But he kept walking. He was being led by a bevy of children holding flowers. What looked like three hundred priests all had their phones and tablets out taking video and pictures. Something else was going to happen. And it did. He went to a pedestal which had two things on it: an open illuminated Bible, and a vivid statue of the Baby Jesus. And he kissed the statue and picked up the figure and cradled it in his arms, and then steadily made his way to a life-sized nativity taking up a large area of the basilica. There he placed the statue in the manger and then faced to the scene in prayer. And, I have to admit, this next part was great. Ever so softly, snow began to fall upon the scene. And the children pointed up and smiled. And so did the Pope! It was a fine lullaby to usher me to bed.

After Christmas Day service, which was a deep joy as well, I was tapping my way through the news on my phone and saw the same Nativity scene at the Vatican. Except this time, the tableau included a Ukranian protester running through the scene; she had taken off some of her clothes, bolted on the stage, and had snatched that same baby Jesus, cradling it in her arms, just like Francis had. A basilica guard was chasing her, with a blanket to cover her chest which had written on it "God is woman." The protester was part of a group that is known to criticize the male-dominated hierarchy and theology of the church. And I truly sympathize. We would do well to be sure that our Christian faith does not limit God's gender. And if we need to be reminded of that when we lose sight of it, so be it. If anything, our faith should expand our traditionally small notions of where God resides and who can represent God. The meaning of the Nativity is not that God became a man, it is that God became human. That the Creator became a Creature. The Nativity is not God concentrating power in one type of people, it is sharing that power so that it is available to all people.

But, along with that, I'm particularly interested in the yearning to snatch that baby. You know this happens all the time. People, all sorts of people, kidnap baby Jesus from Nativity scenes every year. They can't resist. It's gotten to the point where the more savvy churches put a GPS tracker in their baby Jesus statue. But I get it. Babies are adorable. Don't tell anyone, but I wanted to snatch the baby Jesus from our Christmas pageant. I had to resist the impulse.

But some people see the thefts of the statues as a hate crime, as part of the "war on Christmas." Not me. I see it more on the spectrum of mischief, in most cases. And also as a way to make a political or religious statement. It's actually, if we have ears to hear, a kind of dialogue with the church that might be saying something we need to hear.

And so I don't tend to mind these protests and these baby nappings. Even when they push the boundaries of decency and good taste, and they can, I'm willing not to take offense. Christ did not come into the world to give us followers more occasions to be offended with people. And Christ did not come to be one more sacred cow to be kept safe and separate from so-called profane hands.

How can we take offense when it is the Nativity itself that is actually breaking more boundaries than we can count: blurring the lines between sacred and profane, the clean and unclean, the saint and the sinner, and the divine and the human. Why are we so shocked at our Nativity scenes being disrupted, when the Nativity itself is one great disruption?

This tableau has God coming into the world in a manner that can take your breath away if you sit with it enough, and we have twelve days to sort through all the layers of what is going on. There are too many to mention, so here's just a few. For one, Mary says yes to a pregnancy that could have easily had her stoned to death. Joseph says yes to Mary despite the risk to his reputation. The conquerors are callous and force the family to pick up and leave home when Mary will be due any minute. The holy child is born in one of the most disgusting places you could imagine, an unclean animal pen. And placed in a feeding trough. And then upon being born, the family has to flee because the so-called king wants the child dead. There is some uncomfortable measure of horror to the whole affair, I'm afraid to say.

The Nativity is not serene and calm at all. If Christmas is done right, to my mind, it should wake us up, not lull us to sleep. For it is a swirling drama of a family having to summon all of their energies in a world that had practically turned against them. It is a glimpse of great courage in a dark time. Of high hope in the lowest of places. And it is into this crisis that God appears.

John sings: "The Word became flesh and lived among us." And the great scandal is that this Word, this presence of God, would dare to be so weak and lowly, and perhaps illegitimate, at least to some ways of thinking. But God lives a bold kind of life, a life of risk and vulnerability, as all true love also is. As we will discover, if we follow this child as it grows, it is a life that all of the darkness of this world threatens, but cannot snuff out.

And, amazingly, it is a life that we can live, too. A glory we can share. As John sings, "and we have seen his glory." Traditionally, the glory of God was known to strike people dead. But now, no more. We can see God's glory on our level, "the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."

This is the Epiphany of Christmas: That God's glory isn't isolated on the top of some mountain like Sinai, or cordoned off in the sacred precincts of the Temple, but that the glory of God could be in the muck of this world with us, that the glory of God could enter our hearts and animate our lives.

This is why I felt the Pope's closing procession was so sophisticated, because it was referring to this process which is in the Christmas reading from John's Gospel that we read just now. The Christ child is taken from the bible with the pedestal on it (the Word) and taken to the Nativity scene where the hopes of the Scriptures are finally made real on earth, they are finally lived. The hope for Christ which had simmered for so long has now been fulfilled. What was promised by God is finally done in Humanity. Peace and Mercy. Grace and Truth. God's presence and love among all people, full stop. The whole nine yards. The Word made flesh. It is as if God comes no longer in the black and white of prophet's scrolls and messianic dreams, but now in living color, with the emphasis on the living.

But if I were planning my own Christmas liturgy, at least the one of my dreams, I would include that procession of the statue from the Word of God to the Manger of Bethlehem. But I would also be sure to add another procession. Yet this would have to be a mystical procession on another plane. And in that mystical procession we would take the baby Jesus out of the manger of the Nativity scene and then somehow make our way through the doorway of your heart and solemnly place the Christ child there in one of its chambers, where it may rest, and be fed, and mature, and circulate in and through you.

Because it is central to the meaning of Christmas, that the Word, that activity of God, doesn't end in Bethlehem. There is a plan still unfolding to this very day. We read Paul preaching of a trajectory of hope that maps out what this birth means for you and me. Christmas happened, as Paul says, "...so that we might receive adoption as children." And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" It seems that the whole point of the Word becoming flesh in Jesus is so that that hope might make its way through the agony of the generations so that even in our tumultuous time the Word might become flesh in us. So that Jesus' prayers might become our prayers. That Christ's bravery might be our bravery. So that we too might become daughters and sons of God, heirs of ancient hope and promise grounded in the heart of God and springing forth from our own.

That's the plan.

Merry Christmas.

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