

# Sermon: Christmas Eve

The Rev. Mike Wernick

December 24, 2016

Year A

Isaiah 62:6-12

Psalm 97

Titus 3:4-7

Luke 2:1-20

For thousands of years... leaders... and rulers... have sought to gain and wield and hold on... to power and authority... could there... I wonder... possibly be some ego involved... but they are generally certain... that they know how to do it better than anyone... and when everyone realizes that... the happier they'll be... right... Caesar Augustus must have thought that... then Rome wouldn't have to deal with so many insurgents... but for now... he decides on a census to increase his tax revenue... everyone must interrupt their own lives... so he can enhance his life... everyone must go to the city of their birth... while he remains in his palace... he... just as many others have done since him... is making decisions to strengthen himself... at the expense of the weak and powerless...

Even without a degree in psychology... it's easy to see that the desire for this kind of power... can sometimes result... from the presence of something that is absent... from unmet developmental dependency needs... from an exaggerated sense of competition... from the pressure to be someone other than who you are... from believing that mom liked your brother more... or from fear... if Augustus had seen a psychologist... he might have worked out his issues... focused on what really matters... and become a much nicer guy...

We celebrate a seven-week Advent at Two Churches... to help us remember what tonight's *really* all about... we celebrate a seven-week Advent so we're less distracted by this world... and more focused... not just on the baby Jesus in a manger... but on hope... on light... on the fullness of God's plan for all of creation... but sometimes... we can get so caught up in the busy-ness of the season... so caught up in the Christmas-culture which surrounds it... that it's hard to think about Jesus...

According to Harvard Divinity School theologian Harvey Cox... when religious hope is no longer at the center of our holiday celebrations... Christmas can become just a family reunion... Easter nothing more than a spring-style show... and Thanksgiving a time when there is no one to thank... and there can be a void that waits to be filled by the holy... the presence of this absence... is reflected in St. Augustine's words: "Thou has made us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless until we rest in Thee."

Jesus' birth... as we heard in tonight's Gospel... is made known... not to the exalted Emperor... not to the high-ranking Governor... but to simple shepherds... and the message of the angels... shows that God is on the move to dethrone the powerful... and lift up those who don't get into palaces... because when the rich and powerful open the doors of welcome to the marginalized... when they practice full inclusion with the foreigner... when they try to see themselves in the eyes of the outsider... there can be fear and apprehension... because it levels the playing field in ways people can't imagine... it may mean they have to reign in their egos... and share power... and it raises questions... will they have to give up their riches... like the wretched excess that Augustus lorded over others... Augustus probably fooled himself into thinking that the more money he had... no matter where it came from... the more he could control his life and those around him... but that's the kind of control that no one has... remember the parable about the rich man who built barns...

And I'm remembering... that there are some celebrities who distrust the motives of those who want to be their friends... because they fear that they're liked... not for themselves... not for who they are... but for their *cachet*... for their wealth... for who they know... for the doors they can open...

But even with all his wealth and power... I believe it was Augustus... who was really the outsider... who constructed a moveable... but gated community around himself... that went where he went... a community that insulated itself from God's rules... from God's

welcome and inclusion... a community that expected everyone else to worship Augustus... instead of God...

This past Sunday afternoon... Joel and I chose to become outsiders... chose to feel some of what outsiders feel... but in this case... it wasn't oppressive... we attended an early afternoon service at Sudanese Grace Episcopal Church... it's the congregation led by Fr. Zachariah Char... one of the Lost Boys of Sudan... the service was designed to include the children... it was conducted... as much as possible by the children... who welcomed all of us... read the lessons... played instruments... and helped distribute communion... but there were no hymnals... and it wouldn't have mattered if there were... because all of the hymns were sung in Dinka... the liturgy was in English but the hymns were in Dinka... and so we couldn't sing... we couldn't really even follow along...

This is the experience so many of us know... when we are guests in someone's house... when we visit another country... and when we visit another church... customs are different... and they just do some things... the way they do them... so we joined in as and when we could... but we were welcomed... and accommodations were made... just as we do our best... to welcome visitors here...

Throughout his life... Jesus lacked a permanent home... just as the Lost Boys did for many years... but that's how Jesus comes to us... as an outsider... who transcends what we know... and brings us what God knows... holiness itself... that fills any void... fixes any brokenness... heals any dis-ease... and just as our diocese has chosen to stand with these Sudanese... Jesus comes to stand with us...

That may be why William Sloane Coffin, Jr. wrote... *The world of course... is in a frightful mess... but because of us... not because of God... God could only clean up the mess by taking away our freedom... but without freedom where could love be... so paradoxically... it is because God is a loving God... that there is so much suffering in the world... but because God is a loving God... God is suffering too... and suffers also*

*through the bodies and souls of God's creatures... which is why Paul writes... For while we live... we are always being given up to death for Jesus' sake...*

*Too often... churches have wrongly taught that the opposite of love is hate... but as regards love... I am sure the Bible is right... the opposite of love is not hate... but fear... There is no fear in love... perfect love casts out fear...*

Tonight... we celebrate that perfect love has come into the world... and by virtue of its perfection... by virtue that its presence is present... it challenges every notion and practice that exists in opposition to it... it unlocks gated communities... it brings a message of hope to those who can hear... it brings a message of light to the darkness of fear... and it offers everything... without price... without contract... without expecting anything in return... only a covenant of love... a deepening of relationship... and a promise that by letting go... we gain that which really is worth holding on to... a Love which exceeds all love...

We don't really hear much Episcopal or Lutheran talk about angels... but in Luke's Gospel... angels rejoice when good things happen on earth... and John Shea reminds us... there's no finer way to finish this divine announcement... than by bringing on stage... the heavenly host to sing this "good news" summary... heaven and earth have come together... the human and the divine are connected through God's self-emptying... and we can... as the angels say... be not afraid... love is born this night... Merry Christmas!

Mike+