

Sermon for Christmas
RCL Lectionary
[Isaiah 9:2-7](#) / [Titus 2:11-14](#) / [Luke 2:1-20](#) / [Psalm 96](#)
December 24th, 2009
The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Christmas for the (Un)Closeted Christian

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

I was sitting this morning with a friend, a Rabbi, as our sons played together on the plaza in downtown. It was a brief, last-minute Advent break for me – the last breath before the plunge into all the Christmas activities of this year. He asked me if I had my Christmas sermon all prepared, and I had to tell him no! I was still waiting for the right story, the right theme to emerge to go with the outline that was starting to form in my heart and head. I recounted with a nervous chuckle that I seem to be writing and preaching best these days under pressure of deadlines. Somehow, it comes together just in time.

That said, it's a little unnerving, to say the least, on Christmas Eve morning to not have the Christmas sermon writ yet. But that in itself, for my walk at least, is part of the expectation of Christmas – the “not ready yet” nature of the season, the table not quite set, the gifts not all quite wrapped, the house not quite prepared. But now we are here – Christmas is upon us – and in the words of an Anglican prayer: “It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be.”¹

And my sermon is here, because sure enough, early this afternoon, I stumbled by grace across a reflection that appeared on Salon.com. It was a reflection that captured the essence of Christmas for me this year, and for where we are in our common life – a startlingly honest and insightful article by Ada Calhoun, who writes:

It was Sunday morning in my scruffy Brooklyn, N.Y., neighborhood, and I was wearing a dress. Walking to the subway, I ran into a friend heading home from yoga class. She wore sweats and carried her mat over her shoulder. "Where are you going so early all dressed up?" she asked, chuckling. "To church?" We shared a laugh at the absurdity of a liberal New Yorker heading off to worship.

The real joke? I totally was.

Inside the church, it's cool and quiet. I read the Collect of the day in the Book of Common Prayer, which urges us: "While we are placed among things that are passing away, to hold fast to those that shall endure." My recent layoff no longer seems like the end of the world. I take Communion and exchange the peace and listen to the sermon. As I'm walking back up the aisle, I feel reoriented and calmer, the indignities of the week shift into perspective.

These moments are not only sacred; they are secret. Outside, on the steps of the downtown Manhattan church, I think I see someone familiar coming down the sidewalk, and I bolt in the other direction.

¹ From “Night Prayer,” A New Zealand Prayer Book, pg. 184.

Why am I so paranoid? I'm not cheating on my husband, committing crimes or doing drugs. But those are battles my cosmopolitan, progressive friends would understand. Many of them had to come out -- as gay, as alcoholics, as artists in places where art was not valued. To them, my situation is far more sinister: I am the bane of their youth, the boogeyman of their politics, the very thing they left their small towns to escape. I am a Christian.²

It's a passage that could have been written for us in the Bay Area, couldn't it? And it sat for me in stark contrast to another reflection I read this morning entitled "The Meaning of Christmas," a harsh one that seemed to be out of the fundamentalist play book about Jesus coming into the world because God was still angry with us – or at least holding us at his holy arm's length – upset over what happened in the Garden of Eden or the contemporary findings of science, or what have you. . .³ That, in essence, the message of Christmas had something more to do with what we are against than what we are for. This was a message that to me that more readily captures the spirit of our age, but less the true spirit or meaning of Christmas.

Ada Calhoun's piece about being a secret Christian spoke to me and Christmas so much more deeply not simply because she attends an Episcopal Church, but because she talks in a profound sense to the central event of this night – this child born in our hearts and in our midst – almost in secret and off the beaten path – who even before he can speak transforms the very fabric of our lives. This child and his mother holding him, pondering all these things in her heart. . .

And how embarrassing it is – especially in a post-Christendom era like the one we live in; in a diverse and secular era where being Christian is becoming increasingly unusual and slightly odd – that we – conservative, liberal, and in the middle alike – gather together this evening and call this fragile, gurgling child "God," revere him, give him every accolade we can imagine. And then we join the illiterate shepherds and the down-and-out to worship him, unnoticed, at first, by the powers and principalities of this or any age.

And how we as Christians walk with this faith every moment of every day somewhere at work in our lives, sometimes secretly shielding it from the harsh and cynical gaze of others, sometimes embarrassed by the militant clothing it receives from some of our sisters and brothers. We want to be courageous as a faithful people. Indeed, frequently, we ought to be. But our courage is not wrought on believing we are right and others are wrong. Nor is it wrought on a score-card of "saved" souls. It is instead born in this marginal way, out of the recognition that life is extraordinarily vulnerable, and that our God has not come to us with vengeance or anger or a cosmic balance sheet, but has instead simply and somewhat secretly come among us, as one of us. That our redemption belongs to this child who only knows right now that he is hungry, who needs the warmth and attention of his mother to survive, who needs to be swaddled and suckled and rocked gently by those who love him.

Christmas, a story of stories, is at once the story of the fragility of grace in our lives. Quite possibly it's a sign of our times to consider the tender grace when there has been so much upheaval for so long around us – personal, financial, vocational. I've had people in my office at least once a week for several weeks now who have been

² From "I am a closet Christian." by Ada Calhoun.

http://www.salon.com/news/religion/index.html?story=/mwt/feature/2009/12/21/closet_christian

³ "The Story of Christmas. . ." by Charles Biggs. <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=3366>

wrestling with unemployment for many months – some over a year. People struggling to make ends meet, people in tears struggling with where God might be calling them next – when the most obvious and experiential answer feels like “nowhere.” Grace for them is fragile, maybe a bit embarrassing, like the Christ-Child, tender in the raw places of the soul worn down by the ups and downs of a capricious world.

Somehow, we expect a Super-God to swoop down and save us from the vagaries of history, the places we find ourselves – those places where we never intended to end up. But most of us learn sooner or later to stop pointing fingers and accept that we are often ending up in places in our lives – both difficult and easy, tough and wonderful – through no great fault of our own. Sooner or later our pretense at control over our lives gives way to a more realistic assessment that we are dependent and interdependent on countless others who came before us and who are around us. Most of our lives, quite frankly, are not within our control. The suffering and joys that we receive are rarely asked for, even more rarely bought or purchased. And so we struggle as our spiritual ancestors have done for generations with a desire for a God to rescue us, a powerful divinity to shore us up and hem us in. Or we have turned to our own devices and built economic or military juggernauts. But they cannot save us, as even they succumb to the slow erosion of time.

This night, we receive neither control over our own destinies, nor a God who guarantees the future. Instead, our redemption begins with this child, this fragile grace. The Christ-child who reminds me of the tender power of a smile or a gentle touch, the delicate beauty as we sing in one hymn this time of year of a rose, or a human heart revealed in a moment of honest humility. Of Mary pondering all these things deep in the secret places of her heart. These are the images of our God at this time. Not what we thought we needed. Not what the world tells us our God should be. And certainly not what we wanted at a vulnerable time! But this is the God we receive.

And this is a better God than we might have asked for or imagined. This is a God who understands intimately our plight and misery, our vulnerability and sorrows, the fragility of our happiness and the sweetness of our joy. Not an aloof God, nor a God in armor – spiritual or otherwise – but a God open and humble as we truly are when we remember where we came from and where we are going. When we pause from our collective hubris and realize the tender, fleeting grace that we call life. There is simply only one way to redeem this embarrassingly fleeting life for the Creator of all that is, and that is to enter it fully and take on every aspect of our humanity. To bundle up all our sorrows and joys, our disappointments and victories; to bundle everything that is us up in swaddling clothes and rock it gently in a primordial love that is eternal.

And that is good news as the shepherds gather and the angels sing, even here on the seeming margins of all that is powerful and potent in a post-Christendom world – just as it was in a little Judean village at the edge of an empire all those years ago. A bit embarrassing, perhaps, but nonetheless moving. Because now we know we are not alone. Now we know it is not simply that our redemption has drawn near, but our God has entered our lives, body and soul. And we are touched by that divine grace and love. . .and we will never be the same.