

December 24, 2011
Christmas, B
Luke 2:1-20

Earlier in the week I was pondering in my heart what approach to take in this sermon this evening, and I went onto one of my favourite websites to get a sense of the conversation among my peers. Yes, even ministers have websites! The one I love is called Working Preacher. It makes me think of all of us preachers shouldering our axes and heading out into the woods whistling a merry tune as we get down to our task – to fell the great sermonic forest.

On Working Preacher this week, there was a general acknowledgement that the image of the nativity that Luke gives us in his gospel, that Joan read for us a moment ago, that the image in our day and age has become problematic. In our culture we portray Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus lingering tenderly in a completely antiseptic barn, with immaculate farm animals, and shepherds so clean cut they all resemble George Clooney. It is a saccharine image, and thinking, intelligent people can be forgiven if they turn their heads away in shame. What does this have to do with faith?

Brian Krushel, one of the working preachers who chipped in to the internet conversation I was reading, expressed his reaction to this hi-jacking of the birth of Jesus with three simple words: Occupy the Nativity! (1) I just love that! In this era, when fundamentalists want the bible to be literally true, and post-modernists want it to be allegorically true, and post-post-modernists are clinging at the edges of Christmas just hoping they can hang on for the ride, what do we do about the baby in the manger?

Tonight we're going to Occupy the Nativity, and attempt to wrestle it back from consumerism and commercialism and capitalism and cynicism and atheism and spiritual bankruptcy. Because to reject it outright, to turn our world-weary eyes away from the simple, ancient, homespun ornament of the story, and to set it back up on the shelf with the other rejected baubles we have inherited, is to lose the truth, the kernel, the shining nugget at the center of the archetypal story.

The classic theological term for the event of the nativity is *incarnation*. If you've ever ordered food in a Mexican restaurant then you know that when it comes *con carne* it comes with meat. In-carne, means 'with meat' or 'in the flesh,' 'the en-fleshment' of God. Remember when Lady Gaga wore a "meat dress" to the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards? She walked out onstage draped in a garment made of flank steak. All that meat! It was both horrifying and provocative.

Have you ever made a stew? Have you ever slapped a slab of meat up on the table and carved into its buttery softness with your knife? It just falls apart. That is what flesh does. It breaks. It bleeds. It is so vulnerable. It has no shell, no carapace, nothing at all to protect it.

Just like us. I am sure by now you have discovered that nothing protects us, either. There is nothing hard, no fast car, no fancy house, no diamond ring, no possession in the world that will keep our hearts from the pain that can sear into us like fire on the grill. Disappointment. Betrayal. Weakness. Failure. Grief. They criss-cross our poor fleshly lives like stripes.

And this story, this nativity that we gather around tonight, is the story of the same stuff, a human body, the incarnation, in which, as our former Moderator Peter Short says, “God leaps off the high tower of heaven and takes the ghastly and gorgeous plunge down into the world, deep into the flesh.” (2)

In this story, the one that Luke either inherited or created, the one that glimmers with glory and rustles with angel wings, we receive the precious inheritance of faith – the golden nugget. It is simply this: that God loves us so much, that God has bridged the impossible divide between God and humanity. Now Christ, says Trappist monk, Thomas Merton, sleeps in our poor flesh like dynamite. (3)

This story is telling us that our bodies, our hearts, our flesh, which is made to break open and to bleed, has become the very stuff of God. It is our frail human flesh that lead us to discover God’s intimate presence. We should not turn away from our weakness, our suffering, our embodiment, for this story tells us that it is our brokenness that opens us up to compassion, for others and for our own self.

Mary and Joseph bending over the child in the manger are an icon – a symbol of a theological truth. They are the ‘short-hand’ that we use to say to each other and to the world: look – look at your hand, your arm, your belly, your legs – look at your flesh, and the flesh of those around you. There is God. Your body is a sacrament, just like the bread and the cup that will soon be here on this table – because it embodies the presence of God, and echoes the incarnation of Christ, who took flesh and walked among us. Amen.

(A sermon preached by The Rev. Dr. Kate Crawford at First-St. Andrew’s United Church, London, Ontario www.fsaunited.ca)

- (1) Brian Krushel, side-bar comment to “Something More” by David Lose, on Working Preacher at http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=537 accessed on Friday, December 23, 2011. Brian also refers to post-post-modernists, a phrase I borrow here.
- (2) Peter Short, *Outside Eden: Essays of Encouragement*. Observer Publications, 2006, p. 35.
- (3) Thomas Merton, referenced by William McNamara, *Earthy Mysticism: Contemplation and the Life of Passionate Presence*, (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1984), p. 8.