



St. Paul's Church

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Holiness and Precarity

With all the descriptions we have heard of this year, “a year like no other,” “a year we will all remember,” all the times we have heard, “never in all my life...”, such is the year to which we have said goodbye, at least in the church’s calendar. In all likelihood, the Christmas season beginning in a few days will reflect it. I know that many of us will have a season colored by loss or physical separation: such will certainly be the case for me. But as much as I have heard from all kinds of people how glad they will be to have 2020 in the rear-view mirror, I cannot say the same, because it has been the occasion for a lot of learning, for understanding ourselves better and for trust in an enfleshed God who does not fail us.

If we see the year gone by as one of constant, unmitigated crisis, we are missing the point about ourselves and this God who, after all, has been

present on this journey with us. As much as we want to romanticize a baby gurgling into the night, surrounded by the adoring gaze of the rest of the Holy Family, the journey is a very hard one for them, filled with uncertainty, danger and rejection. I often think about the cruelty of circumstances that is part of the Christmas story, even if we supply the details ourselves. For the Holy Family, there were likely no masks, no social distancing to worry about. But there was contingency, the constant state of human contingency with which we all have contend. The roads to Bethlehem, after all, were not patrolled by police or anyone else to ensure safety. As we are reminded in the birth narratives, God’s audacious gamble on humanity did not end with Gabriel’s announcement to a young virgin about what He had in store for humanity. It was present in Herod’s murder of the Innocents, his cross-

examination of the visitors from the East. Those in positions to help in God’s plan do not come off very well (they rarely do in scripture), but that fact does not change God’s determination to see this remarkable gamble through.

In my view, we have to see this year in the same light. At this time last year, no one could have predicted the suffering, the uncertainty and separation we are now enduring. With it, however, has come learning about our own capacity (with God’s help) for ingenuity and resilience. We cannot hear the birth stories without marveling at the same quality in the Holy Family, those who offered protection to those in precarious circumstances, just as we do at St. Paul’s. My prayer is that we can continue to do so to all the holy families and people we meet, in this season and through the year to come.

Fr. Mark

Broken and Enduring Fables

I have been reading the poet Dante lately, especially his trip to heaven in the "Paradiso," the last volume of his three-part journey through the world of the damned and the saved. While I began it hoping to get a better idea of what a late medieval conception of salvation looked like, versus the ones we carry, I was intrigued by the saying of the Rev. Anne McConney, who reminds us that Dante gives us, "the place where all our fables are broken," that we are compelled to jettison all our broken fables when we are dealing with the appearance of and enfleshed Savior so that we can move into the reality of our faith lives as we actually experience them. Especially during a hard year, we tend to look toward a misty-eyed Christ, gazing lovingly at children and healing the sick instead of the one who overturned money changers' tables, condemned hypocrisy and called for repentance, for a change of mind from all of us.

If you are like me, especially at the end of an indescribable year, we want the fable of the Jesus that has the sheen of all the good will we feel we need to place on him. For several years, I worked at the Church of the Holy Trinity



in Center City Philadelphia, which had a chancel backed by a mural of the Nativity/ Epiphany scene, with the holy family in a stable, surrounded by men in odd clothes bearing gifts from the east. The single nod to contemporary lives was the briefcase that Joseph had set down by the manger, presumably so he could pick it up on the way back to the office. It was an extended lesson in living with a fable year-round, even through the very hard lessons of Holy Week, where we could see the dissonance of a crucified God against the image of a family rejoicing at the birth of an entirely domesticated Savior, cooing under the indulgent smiles of family and adoring strangers.

We have been dealing with many broken fables this year and, however hard it has been, one that has been shattered is the idea that human dignity is something we can take for granted. Having looked through the last year in pictures, even among the death and isolation,

have been images that even through mists of tear gas and the ugliness of violence, that we have recognized that there is something supremely important, even holy, in our humanity. I have been thinking of the Great Exchange, found in our collect for the Second Sunday after Christmas, which reads as follows:

O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our humanity, your Son Jesus Christ; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

It is a vision of God become human so that we might become divine. We have had to work hard lately to see each other's humanity, much less our divinity, but there is something holy in this effort. The work of the church is fundamentally of restoration and my prayer for this coming year is for this year is the reconciliation of all peoples. It is possible the moment we let go of our domesticated God, our broken fables, and look at the year ahead as one of opportunity to be the reconciling voice of the church in this world.

Fr. Mark

Bonhoeffer and Christmas

Our question is whether God has really sent the One who has the right and authority for complete, all-embracing, final redemption. And the Christmas message is the complete, glorious “Yes” of the answer to this question. It is our task, our blessed task, at Christmas to hear the message in all its simplicity and to utter it just as it stands... We do not have to demand, to plan, and to exhort again, thank God, we simply have to hear and to say what has been given by God as our real, our complete, hope, without any of our doing and our working.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Advent letter 1940

As a determined voice protesting the politicization of the Church in ways we can scarcely imagine, Bonhoeffer is a bracing presence this year, at least for me. Like every other institution, the church has had a difficult time. It has had to adapt, through forms that many of us thought it could never take on, through computers, phone calls and all other kinds of ad hoc methods, to be what it has meant to be: a source of unity in times of genuine suffering, a place where we can say our collective “no” to other voices that would have us believe that issues of race are best left to others, a place where we can say that sacred texts cannot be used for partisan use. In his day, Bonhoeffer was confronting the wholesale cooption of the church by the Nazi regime and was positing a completely different body to replace it. The Confessing Church of Germany, of which he was the most articulate

spokesman, was committed to the idea of dignity that cannot be manipulated and used for political ends.

As a martyr for the future of the church and dignity of humanity, Bonhoeffer understood what a Christmas without illusion was. For him, it was the “simple reality of the gracious and merciful action which comes from God into this lost world.” Everything else, he believed, was a distraction: God was doing what God always did, stripping away our illusions, our “elegant and gay pictures and fancies,” everything that draws us from the thought that God coming among us had to be somehow amplified or augmented by our effort. We simply have to listen, “to hear the message in all its simplicity and utter it just as it stands.” God has done the work, continues to do the work, and we are the joyful recipients of the message.

It is a bracing idea for those of us who are trying to make Christmas “special.” This year, of course, that is a hard proposition. Many of us cannot join family who live far from us; we cannot haunt the malls looking for deals. What we have this year is each other and the gift that has always been at the center of this time, an unadorned miracle to utter just as it stands. I hope I am not ruining your Christmas. In my view, this year represents an opportunity for us to hear, with little distraction, the message of the season as it was heard two thousand years ago. God does not need our help this year or any other. We can dispense with our doing and working and simply be, as witnesses of the wonderful, impossible work of God with us.

Fr. Mark

Christmas Services

The Christmas
services at St.
Paul's will be:
7pm
December 24

8am Christmas
Day (Zoom)

Divine Offices on Zoom

Morning
Prayer 7:30 AM
Monday-
Friday

Evening Prayer
5:30 PM
Tuesdays and
Thursdays