

Sermons at Saint Paul's

A Wellspring of spiritual; nourishment; A river of service in Jesus' Name

Advent IV

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Advent ushers us into an unbelievable season characterized by grace. Advent is a season pregnant with possibilities, a season brimmed with the expectations of a welcome into our midst of the incarnate Word which cannot speak a word. The Word-which is God's communication to us, comes in the form of a vulnerable baby who we can hold in our arms and cuddle, a baby whose presence breaks the boundaries between God and humans. In his conversation with King Ahaz, the God the prophet Isaiah presented to Ahaz was one who although thought to be distant was well involved in the daily struggle of the people of Israel. This God's desire has always been the liberation of Israel. The prophet Isaiah's attempt to implore Ahaz to ask for a sign from God was to assure Ahaz that God was indeed present in the life and challenges of Israel.

There has always been a tradition that holds that God was not only far removed from human experience but there was a deep chasm between God and humans. Part of the rationale for this chasm was because the sacredness or holiness of the divine was one which prevented the divine to be deeply close or to intimately interact with sinful humans.

A traditional African myth which sought to explain the chasm between God and humans tells the story of a God whose abode was in the clouds. The clouds were so low that humans could simply touch the clouds. God decided to pull up beyond human reach because when people ate with their hands, they found the clouds low enough for them to clean their hands.

This practice tended to sully God, and so overtime, God pulled up separating Himself from humans thus creating a barrier between Himself and people. The point of the myth was that God could not compromise God's sacredness, nor was He ready to have humans taint Him with their sins.

Call it what you may, but the barrier, gap, chasm or the boundary between humans and God was one that could only last but for a time. And for humans to experience the fullness and salvation of God some way, somehow, those boundaries had to be violated and the barriers of separation brought down.

If the prophecy of Isaiah was about a baby-Immanuel, at whose birth the military siege on Israel would have ended and who would know good from evil, the birth of Jesus-Emmanuel would also end the siege of sin that raises up barriers between us and God, and between us and others.

I need you to think about the reaction of Joseph upon finding out that Mary was pregnant. His reaction was nothing less than a feeling of dismay, disappointment and outright betrayal. By Joseph's standard, Mary's infidelity was only a symptom of the broader human decay. But his righteous instincts also prevented him from exposing Mary to public ridicule; he sought to quietly dismiss her. But just as Mary did not challenge the angel who visited her with the good news of being the God-bearer, Joseph did not challenge the angel who shared with him the good news about Mary's pregnancy being the result of the Holy Spirit. He too realized that he was God-bearer.

This realization meant that he could take Mary back because his poor helpless woman had literally made a home for the Creator of all things. Much as the Ark of the Covenant dwelt with the people of Israel-assuring them of God's abiding presence, so too was Mary the Ark of the New Covenant, bearing in her womb the Son of God-the Word which will assure us-Jews and Gentiles alike of God's abiding presence.

God's desire to cross the boundary that separates Him from humanity has been made possible by a young woman who also dared to cross the boundaries of separation-uniting the sacred with the not-so sacred, the Creator with the created and the divine with humanity in the person of Jesus.

St. Paul in his letter to the Romans reflects on the nature of the personhood of Jesus. On the one hand, Jesus was descended from David according to the flesh, and on the other, as one who through the power of the resurrection was declared the Son of God. Paul should be the last person offering this confession about Jesus. Paul's own encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus affirmed for him the grace that breaks down barriers and violates all other boundaries of separation. It is that grace which makes possible a new birth for each one of us, because we too, like Mary, are holders, places where God chooses to make a home.

St. Simeon, the New Theologian speaks of the two births "The ineffable birth of the Word of God in the flesh from his mother is one thing, his spiritual birth in us is another. For the first, in giving birth to the Son of the Word of God, gave birth to the reforming of the human race and the salvation of the whole world. While the second, in giving birth in the Holy Spirit and to the Word of knowledge of God, continually accomplishes in our hearts the mystery of the renewal of human souls. Thus anyone, married or unmarried, who lives with integrity toward God in the deeper level of their being may not, like Mary, bear the Son of God in the flesh, but they can and do become like her, and will be God-bearers to humankind."

In the poem *Mending Walls* by Robert Frost, we get the sense of an imaginary wall which had to be maintained year in and year out. The narrator, among others, wonders why he and his neighbor have to fix the wall every spring. After all, he is all pine and I am all apples, and these wouldn't cross the boundary. But the neighbor always maintained that "Good fences make good neighbors."

But if “There is something that doesn’t love a wall”, as Frost says, then I am more tempted to believe that it is God that doesn’t love a wall, a boundary or a border. Walls, or barriers and boundaries often separate, inoculate, divide and mitigate the potential for new life. They tend to create insiders and outsiders, those who belong and those who don’t.

To therefore understand the mystery of the incarnation is not to dwell on questions like whether Mary was truly a Virgin, for I do not know if she was. What I do know, however, is she reveals to me that absolute availability and humility of the God who breaks down walls, barriers and violates borders in order to make Himself present to us, and to dwell with us-human beings.

The image of Mary giving birth to Jesus brings up in me the mystery of my own birth. I did not know how it happened, but here I am. My birth and your birth-in whatever form it took, not only connects us to the mystery of birth, but it also invites us to respect the mystery of others. To be able to cross that threshold reduces any desire to build walls or to create boundaries. For deep in our own souls, we realize our own vulnerability and need of others. Julian of Norwich said that “The love of God creates in us such a *oneing* that when it is truly seen, no person can separate themselves from another person. ...In the sight of God all humans are *oned*, and one person is all people and all people are in one person.”

As we look forward to being with our families and loved ones this Christmas season, may we think about the boundaries and barriers that we have built up, and resolve to open up ourselves to let the vulnerable Word which comes to us in silence, break them all down. Amen.