



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you today as a sinner to sinners, as the beloved of God to God's beloved, as one called to bear witness to those called to bear witness. Amen. Please be seated.

When you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see? About a week ago, as I was praying about this sermon, that question came to mind, and I began to ask different people what their answer was to it. When you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see? For some, it is an opportunity to see back into the past. And their answer is full of memories of Christmases past that still somehow recur in Christmas present.

My favorite answer along these lines was given by my wife Claire. She told me that she remembered her very first Christmas as being a moment in which she was lying under the Christmas tree as a little, little girl. And looking up through the branches at all of the ornaments, she was transfixed by one that was perfectly round and perfectly shiny so that she could see in the reflection of the ornament, the whole room. It was as if that Christmas ornament was a kind of prism to see another world.

For others, the answer to the question, when you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see, is an opportunity for them to think about the first nativity and then maybe do some further study of what actually happened 2000 years ago when Jesus was born. And just the other day in a class that we were giving, someone reminded us of the fact that the houses in Israel at the time of Jesus, the animals actually lived inside the house. There were two floors and the animals were on the first floor, and that's where you had the animals you lived with. And then on the second floor is where the family would sleep and live.

And so when the innkeeper said that there was no room, he could only offer them the manger in his own house. He was not kind of being begrudging in his hospitality. He was actually bringing the holy family right into his own house. He just didn't want them to sleep upstairs with the rest of his family. And answering that question helps them close the distance between where we are today and where things were when Jesus was born.

And these two ways of answering this question are important and beautiful because the memories we have of Christmas past always have a way of continuing to shape our present. They shape not only how we experience the holidays emotionally, but they also shape our identity in a powerful way. And

there will never be enough study that we can do of the history around Jesus's coming. Each year it seems that there's one more fold that research tends to uncover in that first century coming of Jesus. This year, it was the way people lived. Years past, it's been about whether the magi were actually Zoroastrians because Zoroastrians are monotheists, like Jews. And so when they came looking for Jesus, they had a kind of preconception of who they were looking for.

But there is an answer to this question that I think is incredibly important. It's something that is critical to how we understand ourselves as Christians and what we are called to be and who we are called to be as Christians. The answer is to the question, when you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see, the answer to that question that I think I'm looking for tonight is I want you to see yourself in Christmas and Christmas in yourself. Because as much as you can try to conjure up these wonderful images of Christmas past, memory is not enough to carry us into the Christmas present. And as much as we can study what happened 2000 years ago, all of that speculation is not the opportunity for transformation that Christmas offers us. Because Christmas is an opportunity for us to see how we are in Christ and how Christ is in us. And this is key because that transformation is vital to who we are called to be, who we were created to be, and who we will be forever.

When you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see? Tonight I want to lift up for you three examples of people who saw in Christmas an opportunity for transformation. The first is from John Newton, who was the famed slave trader turned abolitionist, turned evangelist from the 18th century. John Newton is the author of the hymn that we like to sing, Amazing Grace. And he is someone who had a powerful transformation by encountering God. In 1799, Newton, who had written those incredible words, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind but now I see," in 1799, he wrote another hymn called Praise for the Incarnation. And this is how it goes:

Sweeter sounds than music knows
Charm me in Immanuel's name;
All her hopes my spirit owes
To his birth, and cross, and shame.

When he came, the angels sung,
"Glory be to God on high"
Lord, unloose my stammering tongue;
Who should louder sing than I?

Did the Lord a man become,
That he might the law fulfill,

Bleed and suffer in my room,
And canst thou, my tongue, be still!

No; I must my praises bring,
Though they worthless are, and weak;
For should I refuse to sing,
Sure the very stones would speak.

O my Savior! Shield and Sun,
Shepherd, Brother, Husband, Friend
Every precious name in one!
I will love thee without end.

Now, you might think that the closest correlation to this beautiful hymn that Newton has written would be something like we find today in the Epistle to Titus, in which we are reminded that it is not because of any works of righteousness that we had done, but according to God's mercy in Christ through the water every birth, and renewed by the Holy Spirit that we have been reconciled to God. But Newton, I want to suggest, was actually thinking about the transformation in love that happens when you are confronted by the infinite mercy of God. And what's more I see in this Christmas hymn that Newton writes a kind of corollary to our reading today from Isaiah. At the center of that reading, there is a kind of mention of violence and its end in a person through the birth of a child, and that is precisely how Newton had his transformation from a slave trader to an abolitionist and evangelist.

For in Isaiah we read, "For all the boots of the trampling warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a child given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." Newton knew what it was like to wear a garment rolled in blood. And he knew that he had to be transformed from within and changed by grace and had to be folded into God's love. And so he goes in the same direction when he says, "O my Savior! Shield and Sun, Shepherd, Brother, Husband, Friend," he might as well have also said, "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

So today as you ponder the question about what you will see when you think of Christmas, what transformation are you being invited to as you begin to enter Christmas, and Christmas begins to enter you; as you begin to enter Christ, and Christ begins to enter you, perhaps Newton strikes a chord with you. And the transformation and love that he speaks of is the work that God is already doing in you.

The second poem I want to read for you today goes back a few centuries. Newton is writing in the 18th century and towards the 18th century. And the next poem is from St. John of the Cross, who was writing in the 16th century. And John of the Cross was a Spanish monk who became involved and dedicated to contemplative prayer, he began to have visions of God that were a little out there. And so the Roman Catholic Church did what it often does, they put him in jail for a bit. And then of course there was a miraculous escape. And then they did something even worse, they made him study theology.

And then when they realized he was incorrigible, they decided to try to listen to him and they suddenly were completely thrown by how beautiful his thoughts were and how close he was to God. This is a poem he writes and it is so contemporary sounding, it's amazing to me. It's this:

If
you want
the Virgin will come walking down the road
pregnant with the holy,
and say,
"I need shelter for the night, please take me inside your heart,
my time is so close."

Then, under the roof of your soul, you will witness the sublime
intimacy, the divine, the Christ
taking birth
forever,

as she grasps your hand for help, for each of us
is the midwife of God, each of us.

Yet there, under the dome of your being does creation
come into existence eternally, through your womb, dear pilgrim-
the sacred womb in your soul,

as God grasps our arms for help; for each of us is
His beloved servant
never far.

If you want, the Virgin will come walking
down the street pregnant
with Light and sing ...

For St. John of the Cross, the way in which he finds himself in Christmas, and Christmas finds himself in him, is by exploring the different roles played in our reading today from Luke. To be present 2000 years ago is not a historical journey, but a spiritual journey in which we imagine ourselves as the innkeeper,

welcoming the holy family into our hearts; or as the midwife who is helping Mary give birth to the word of God; or even as Mary herself, who is the first Christian, because she bears Christ inside of her, and that is all that Christian life entails to bear Christ inside of you.

In all of these ways, St. John of the Cross has made Christmas come inside himself and change him. And perhaps there are some of you who resonate with that. You are waiting for Christ to be born. You are willing to be a midwife to God being born in someone else. You are waiting and holding and being willing to somehow walk with God and be God's helper. God who made the heavens and the earth, who cradles the universe in the palm of God's hand, needs us to complete the work of incarnation.

The final image I have for you is a bit unusual. The artist is controversial. It's on the cover of your bulletin and it's by Eric Gill, who was a complex man who turned to Christianity because he knew he needed strong medicine, and was a deeply influential artist in England after the First World War and through most of the '50s and '60s. There's not a cathedral or church in England, it seems, that doesn't have his work somewhere. And this is a depiction that he does of the Nativity.

And one of the things that you need to know about Nativity scenes is that what makes a Nativity scene is not just the fact that you see a little family in a little room somewhere, and it's not the fact that they have halos. It's the fact that when you look at that scene of the Holy Family, you not only see an image of Christ's birth, but you also see reminders of Christ's death because in the visual canon of Christian art, there is a practice of knitting these two together. You can see that in some of the stars that sit in Nativity scenes, which stretch out vertically and horizontally to form a cross or in other symbols, it's a way of reminding us that the God who creates out of nothing can create not only Jesus, the Risen Lord who defeats death and sin in the grave, but also the Jesus who comes to us as an infant, as a child, and yet as a king.

And so there's always a reminder in Nativity scenes of not only Christ's birth but His death. And in this one, there is an incredible, beautiful one among perhaps others. And that is, you see in this scene, a rooster. And that might make sense at face value because this is an image of the Holy Family at dawn. And roosters, I don't know if you've noticed, but at dawn they tend to make a lot of noise. That's what they do. It's kind of their nature. But there's also another layer of symbolism here, because Jesus said to Peter right before His crucifixion, that before the cock crows three times, you'll deny me and Peter does.

And so there is embedded in this Nativity scene, a message, an answer to the question, when you think of Christmas and close your eyes, what do you see? And that answer is this: though we will betray Christ, for all of us is Peter, Christ

will never betray us. Christ will never betray us. The incarnation, the birth of Christ is the promise to you and to me that no matter what we have done, no matter the distance we find ourselves from God, no matter the disappointments we have suffered, no matter the disillusionment we have experienced, no matter the diseases we have struggled with, no matter the death we have faced and looked in the eye, no matter all of those things. No matter the ways in which we have turned away and fled into the darkness rather than facing the light, Christ will never betray us. And perhaps that is a comfort to you as well.

When you close your eyes and think of Christmas, what do you see?