



# CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

*Hidden in Plain Sight The Fourth Sunday of Lent 3/14/2021*

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.

Have you ever had one of those moments in your life in which you suddenly discover Christ hidden in plain sight? By that, I mean, not that there is a literal manifestation of Jesus in the flesh and blood, but somehow a kind of manifestation and revelation of Jesus and His grace.

Last month, I had such a moment. As some of you know, I'm on the board of Samaritas, which is a wonderful organization in Michigan that does adoption and foster care and refugee resettlement and senior care. And Samaritas was able to get for its board members access to vaccines. And I took up that offer because of the things I have to do.

And so I traveled to Grand Rapids to a senior facility to get the vaccination. And as I was making my way through that incredible corridor and protocol, I began to notice first and foremost, the nurses around me, and I began to realize how incredibly careful they're being, the attention to detail. I suddenly had one of those revelations that the nurses that surround us every day when we're sick or when we need care, the people who took care of my father in the last few days of his life, they were truly loving people.

And as I made my way through stop after stop, carefully stopping in the area of the floor that had been marked for me, I got to the point in which I was to be vaccinated and I met my nurse, Jan. As Jan was about to vaccinate me, I realized that we were in the chapel of this senior facility. And I asked if I could take a quick picture. And Jan said, yes. And this is the picture that I took. I realized in that moment that I was right in front of the Cross, right in front of the altar, and that Jan was sitting right in front of the altar. And Jan is from a family of ministers. So he thought that what he was doing was a kind of ministry. And so he held up his needle that he's about to place into my arm so I could see in real time, the connection between the grace that comes on the altar and the grace of this vaccination.

And this is a powerful picture for me. I've looked at it again and again in prayer because it seems to hold together a lot of what we see around us these days, a lot of the ways in which we are kind of called by God to engage in the work of seeing Christ who is hidden in plain sight. And by that, I mean that there is in this picture, a kind of ordinary element to things. You see a nurse in the front, he's wearing his personal protection equipment, he's holding a needle and yet his eyes are full of care. And he has been working over the past year as we have contended with this pandemic to care for everybody.

And so I see in Jan himself, the first instance of love incarnate, I see someone who is a helper. Mr. Rogers at one point said that when you see a calamity, instruct the children to

look at the helpers. And for me, I always look at the nurses for some reason, not the doctors, as important as their work is. I look at the nurses because the nurses have always been there and they stay behind after the doctor leaves and they're right alongside you.

And so there, I see Jan, and it's a reminder to me of all the caregivers that have sacrificed themselves so lovingly over the past year, all the ways they have gone above and beyond, all the risks that they've taken to their own self and to their families so that others might be served. And so in Jan, I see a first instance of grace, of love manifest in the midst of things.

But standing behind Jan is this repurposed altar that still remains somehow holy, even though there is no Eucharist to be shared, no body and blood of Christ, no bread and wine sitting on it. The beautiful altar cloth has been carefully arranged, following a great attention to detail. The candles are next to it. The cross is polished and set up and you can see a kind of testimony to the body and blood of Christ itself, a kind of witness to the way in which the bread of Christ is still able to be present, even if it is absent.

This altar has on it a mask on the left, that someone right behind me took off when he was sitting down for reasons I found mysterious, but he was getting himself sorted, I guess. And that altar was patient and accepted the mask and accepted the double duty of being a place that you might put your keys on. And yet nothing could diminish the holiness of it. And that juxtaposition of Jan with his needle and that altar is a reminder to me. It was a manifestation to me. It was a revelation to me of something that's key about Christianity. And this is that Christianity is a belief that Christ has come into time and space to reconcile these things. Christ has come into history as the great American theologian.

Richard Niebuhr once said that in history, you see a double kind of reading. There is the history that we observe, a history that is seen, a history that might be mediated by social media or the news. And then there is the history that is experienced. There's the history that is lived. There is the experience we have in which we encounter not only coherence, but also chaos, not only joy, but also sorrow, not only moments in which we have our hopes realized, but moments that we've for approach with dread and that we somehow survive as an ordeal.

And Christianity is the belief that Jesus Christ reconciles that history, that Jesus Christ reconciles all things, that the Christ who comes among us comes not merely as a Lord of power. Not merely to show us glory, but to show us the Cross. And that Cross has made evident by the love and the willingness to be vulnerable in our midst. And that to me is the powerful promise of Christianity for us.

Last week, I said that one of the things we have to do in Lent is engage in self-reflection and see in the mirror of Christ, an image of ourselves. And Lent for me also means a kind of looking at the world in a different way of realizing that Christ is always around us, that you can find the mask of Christ.

In fact, Martin Luther in the 1530s, somewhere in the late 1530s, he wrote a commentary on Genesis. Luther wrote that there were masks that God wore. He used actually Latin, *larvae dei*, these kinds of disguises that God wears in order to somehow approach us so that we do not get seared by the power of His glory. Luther believed, a Bible reading Christian

that he was, that to look upon God face to face was to court death and disaster, because it says in the book of Exodus, no one looks upon God and lives, but God, in His mercy, God has deigned to put on masks and disguises so that we might see God face to face through flesh and blood.

And Luther sees that in baptism and Eucharist and all the things that we do in church, but we also see it through our five senses because our Lord had decided to work that way. This is what he writes:

“God in His divine wisdom arranges to manifest Himself to human beings by some definite and visible form which can be seen with the EYES and touched with the HANDS, in short, is within the scope of the FIVE SENSES. So near to us does the Divine Majesty place Itself.”

So the question that you and I have to contend with today, the question we have to ask ourselves is where have we seen God with our five senses, or to put it slightly differently as I did earlier, where have you seen Christ hidden in plain sight?

This image that I took of Jan and the altar, it's a reminder to me of different ways in which artists have tried to depict the process of vaccination, usually in religious ways. In the DIA, there's another picture that I want to bring before you today. It's done by Diego Rivera when he did his incredible mural of Detroit Industry. And their Rivera wanted to convey the power of vaccination, the power of human beings to use the work, the science to somehow bring and technology to somehow bring healing.

And so Rivera in 1933 did this cartoon, which became a Fresco, and this is called Vaccination. You can see in it a kind of Nativity scene. You see in the place of Mary and Joseph a nurse and a doctor. And behind the babe that's in the front, you see three figures in the back. These are the Magi who are the scientists who have found a way to isolate the vaccine. And you see in the front, the animals, which are not merely the animals you might find around a manger, but these are the animals from which the serum comes.

Rivera paints this picture and it caused a great deal of controversy because so many Catholic priests and Episcopal priests rebelled against the fact that the Nativity would be seen in such a way. But I think they misread the meaning of the painting, which was not merely to spiritualize the material. But to remind us of the power of the five senses, the gift of our body, the way in which our history can be changed if we could see the grace that shines through it, and that we can enter into a new way of being.

In all of our readings today, you have a kind of manifestation of Christ. In all of them, you have a kind of way in which we might see Christ revealed. In all of them, you'll see in the first reading from Numbers, the story of the Israelites who are in the wilderness and are bitten by poisonous snakes and are dying. And God brings to them through Moses, a serpent that is made of bronze and placed on a pole. And by looking upon that serpent, they can live.

And that is in some ways, a reminder to us that in the Cross of Christ, in the Christ who is manifest in history, in the Christ who is hidden in plain sight, that Christ will be manifest just in moments of joy, but also in moments of pain, not just in moments of exaltation, but

also in moments of grief. And it is often by staring death in the face that we find the life that Christ gives us.

And in our reading from the Gospel of John, you have this incredible moment in which you find the gospel in miniature as Martin Luther said, and you have at the center of it, the promise, for God so loved the world that He gave His only son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish, but have eternal life. And in this wonderful, beautiful verse, which has been unpacked countless times by preachers, I want to draw your attention to one word, world, cosmos, which means not only the things that are coherent, but also the chaos that threatens us.

And over the past year, you and I have had to find our way. Maybe toggling back and forth between the reactive self that gets triggered by all the chaos, by all the challenges, by all the crises that we're facing and the responsible self that we have, the responsive self that responds and sees and notices the greater things that God is doing.

H. Richard Niebuhr in his incredible book, *The Meaning of Revelation* said that the key for a Christian is not so much to ask at any event, what must I do, but rather what is God doing? And it's in that responsive moment that we began to get the resources we need, because we realize that we are not alone making our way. But rather that God is coming to us always as grace. God is willing to cross into vulnerability. God is willing to have his face spit at and nails driven through His arms and legs so that we might be free.

The final piece where we see this Christ who is hidden in plain sight is in the promise that is given in Ephesians, the last lines of the reading, "For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not of your own doing; it is the gift of God, not the result of works so that none may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life."

In other words, you and I will not find our way to God by looking at things beyond ourselves. You and I are not able by our own industry, by our own good works by our own holiness to find our way to God. But the grace of Christianity is that God has come to us in Christ. God has closed the distance with us. God is always around us if we have eyes to see. So Lent is a time not only of engaging in self reflection, not only of looking to Christ as a kind of mirror, but seeing in Christ a kind of seeing the Christ who is revealed in the mask, the Christ, who is disguised, the Christ, who is hidden in plain sight.

I want to finish today by sharing with you a poem by Mary Karr, she wrote it in 2001. It's called *Descending Theology: Christ human*. It picks up on so many themes that I've tried to lift up in this sermon that I'll read it twice. And in between the first and second reading, just pick up a little bit of that, of what she and I are moving along the same lines with. This is what she writes.

Such a short voyage for a god,  
and you arrived in animal form so as not  
to scorch us with your glory.  
Your mask was an infant's head on a limp stalk,  
sticky eyes smeared blind,

limbs rendered useless in swaddle.  
You came among beasts  
as one, came into our care or its lack, came crying  
as we all do, because the human frame  
is a crucifix, each skeleton borne a lifetime.  
Any wanting soul lain  
prostrate on a floor to receive a pouring of sunlight  
might—if still enough,  
feel your cross buried in the flesh.  
One has only to surrender,  
you preached, open both arms to the inner,  
the ever-present hold,  
out-reaching every want. It's in the form  
embedded, love adamant as bone.  
In a breath, we can bloom and almost be you.

Here we have in this incredible poem or reminder of the *larvae dei* that Luther speaks about the God who is hidden in plain sight. “Your mask was an infant's head on a limp stock.” Christ came vulnerable so that He might be in solidarity with us, so that He might close the distance. “You came among beasts as one, came into our care or its lack,” into the midst of this world in which we find both chaos and coherence. Both care and the lack of it, Christ has come to somehow reveal to us the riches of grace.

And deep within our bodies there is our skeleton, which is a kind of crucifix, a kind of Cross. It's hidden in plain sight. It's with each of us, we all have the Cross on us and in us at all times, as adamant as bone is the love of God, if we can only see it. And as we take every breath, we bloom and become new people.

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In a breath, we can bloom and almost be you

Christ is as deep as the bones beneath your skin. Where have you seen him lately?

[End of Recording]