



## CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

I speak to you tonight 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.

As many of you know, I am getting an executive MBA at the University of Michigan. I'm not doing it because I'm in the middle of a midlife crisis. That already happened 10 years ago when I became the rector of Christ Church Cranbrook. But I'm doing it because I've always been fascinated and I always wanted to learn and I started to do it and I loved it. But one of the things that I never imagined was going to be a part of this incredible degree is that I was going to be part of one of the most uniquely diverse classes that I've ever been part of in higher education. More than 50% of our class are people of color. And many of them come from different ethnicities and races.

And one group that I fell into, for reasons that are interesting, are the first generation Indians, which number about 30% of the class. And we just kind of got each other in a weird way. I'm a little bit of an intense person when it comes to school work, and they're a little intense too. And we just kind of made good teammates, we worked hard. We enjoyed things. And then of course I had Manisha who is Indian herself, and so I had to kind of phone a friend when I needed to ask for some clarification.

I've become good friends with this group and we go out to dinner every residency and oftentimes it's Indian food. And it's been wonderful to have these exchanges during it. I'll often be the only Caucasian that's there. And I've noticed a couple of things that have happened. One is that the waiters are usually really good at figuring out who's the leader of the dinner group, and they know that it's not me. And they will find the leader and they'll look at them and they'll say, ma'am or sir, the spice level. And then their eyes will dart to me and dart back to them. Then there's usually this very kind of polite pause and they'll all look at me, because not everybody's eaten with me before, and I can say medium, but a notch higher than you might think for someone like me. And so we get wonderful food.

It's also been a moment in which I've had incredibly frank conversations about God. Amazingly, almost all of my classmates who are Indian are Hindu. And when we get together, it's not uncommon that God gets brought up. And on December

15th, we finished our final exams and we went to actually a Nepalese restaurant in Ann Arbor called Everest Sherpa. And Nepalese food is like Indian food, but made for a cooler climate that's a little less spice, a little more cinnamon. Nepal is of course majority Tibetan Buddhist.

But there we were, me, Kartik, Ajit Amit. They asked us if we wanted chai and I said, I'll have some chai. It's got to be good here. Ajit had some chai and then Kartik said when it came, is it good chai? And I said, yes, it's very good chai. And then he just looked past me to Ajit and he said, Ajit is a good chai? And Ajit said it's very good chai. So he got some and he took a sip and he said, Bill, it is good chai. I felt like we had crossed a bridge together.

But then Ajit said to me, how do you define God? And I found this immediately so interesting because when I speak with Westerners, the question I often am asked is, how do I believe in God? But this assumed that there was a God, how do I define God? And Ajit became impatient after asking the question. He said, I'll tell you how I do it. He said, I believe God is higher than we can even imagine and more than we can ever imagine and greater than we can ever imagine. And I said, that's a beautiful definition. I said, my faith teaches me that God has three movements. Yes, God is higher than we can ever imagine. This is a version for what Saint Anselm called the ontological argument, which is that God is that of which nothing greater can be conceived. God is always larger than we can imagine, and if we imagine something or are able to define it, we're being tempted by an idol and not seeing God.

I said, but there is two other movements in Christianity. As big as God is, God is also infinitely small, and you will find God wherever you find love. No matter how fragile that love is, no matter how imperfect it is, no matter how fleeting it is, you'll always find God when you find love because the scriptures tell us that God is love. And then I said, there's a third movement, and I decided to just play a bit with an analogy. I said, I'm going to tell you an analogy. I said, Jesus is my Sherpa. Of course, being in a Nepalese place called Everest Sherpa, surrounded by images of Sherpas helping people up the mountain, they immediately got it and someone said, ah, He shows you the path. I said, yes. I said, but I also mean something more than that, because analogies are never perfect. Jesus is my path.

And there's even something more. Jesus reconciles a God who is infinitely big with a God who is infinitely small. Both of those edges and movements of God are perfectly reconciled in Jesus Christ. And so we have a revealer because the first revelation we experience is usually our own ignorance. We have God, the Redeemer, the love, which is able to redeem anything because it existed. And if it existed, it was part of who God is. And then we have Jesus the reconciler, who holds it all together. And my friend Amit said to me, wow, Christianity is a beautiful religion. This struck me because when I think about how Christianity has

been introduced in India, it hasn't always been seen as beautiful. And yet in that experience, he was able to embrace and see that beauty.

And this is what I want to leave you with today on this Christmas Eve. Christmas is a time in which we recognize those three movements of God, except that for the Christmas story, the Nativity, it's not that we have climbed a mountain, it's that God has come to us. There we find God who is both infinitely big and infinitely small in a child who reconciles us all. Jesus holds together the God of revelation, the God of redemption in His own self, the God of reconciliation. This is what it means to believe in a Trinitarian God, in a three-person God. And this is the hope today for us, is to see that God again for the first time, and to see that reconciliation at work in us today and at work through us today.

The second thing I want to lift up for you today is that idea of beauty. I want desperately for others to see the beauty of Christianity. Too often people see something other than the beauty of Christianity, and we all have fallen short of being amazing witnesses to that beauty. I want us to see that beauty again for the first time. That beauty is powerful and it's saving. It's the kind of beauty that holds everything together. And it's the kind of beauty that the world needs now more than anything else.

As I was thinking about how to convey these two points, God's three movements and the beauty of Christianity, I thought of this image that I saw at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. It's by the photographer Dana Salvo, but it's actually a documentation of someone's private altar in Chiapas, Mexico, and it's called the Blue Nativity. It's on your bulletin. And it's here we see someone who has created an altar in their home so that they could create a sacred place where they could worship God and keep alive their faith and make it precious.

And what's amazing about this altar is that it is beautiful. It's made by figurines that have been purchased in stores. It's been appropriated in different ways, and it's been reconfigured so that it becomes its own work of devotion. This is the beauty of Christianity because we celebrate not just the beauty of God become human, but we celebrate the fact that there was something beautiful in that risk that God took when God became human. That risk and fragility and vulnerability are all part of the beauty of Christianity.

The second thing I want to share with you are just a couple of lines that I got this week when I was reading a sermon that Martin Luther wrote in 1535. So it's possible you've heard it before, if you happen to read a lot of Martin Luther. But he said this – and for Luther beauty in Christmas was not just the magical things like that we're about to sing a beautiful version of *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming* in German. That is fine for Luther, but there was nothing that could ever replace the beauty of the scriptures themselves.

And so he writes in his sermon, "Do not make of the Virgin Mary a stone." In other words, do not make her into a statue that you worship or a statue that cannot feel. Mary, he writes, was terrified. She was a 15-year-old girl. She had no clean water. She had no friends. She was giving birth in a manger where there was absolutely no way to stay sanitary. And somehow she gave birth to this baby. And she knew because of what the angel told her, that she was bearing the Son of God. And that moment of terror brought out from her incredible tenderness as it often does in those who are close to God.

"Do not make Mary a stone." And this to us is a reminder that Christianity and Christmas are touching upon the real things of our lives, the terrors we feel, the uncertainties we feel, the wounds we feel, the challenges we feel, the loneliness we feel. Christianity, by saying to us that Christ was born of Mary, is saying to us that in that vulnerability and in that space of risk, God has already hallowed it in Jesus Christ. And Mary is the first witness.

Luther goes on to say about Jesus, he said, and when you look at Jesus, do not look for him on the walls of your church. Look at him in the faces of the babies you see, because there is the mystery and beauty of Christmas that God became human, fully human. God came, he writes, not to judge, but to save.

This Christmas, make it a resolution to get to know that God in three movements: accept that revelation, feel that redemption, find that reconciliation. And in so doing, let the beauty of our faith guide us. Let others see it and through it the world will be changed and God will be glorified. And most importantly, you and I will be transformed by the Holy Spirit running through us.

Amen.