



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.

One of the things that I count as an incredible blessing that happens to me during the holidays is I get to talk to people who are going through incredible difficulty. Because the holidays, for most of us, are this time in which we try to find our way to joy, celebrate our prosperity, spend some time with our family, and to give thanks to God for these blessings. But for many people, the holidays are a time of unexpected calamity or reminder of past trauma. They're confronted with death, disease, difficulties of one form or another, and disappointment.

And one of the jokes I like to say to my clergy colleagues is that if anything is going to go wrong with a family, it will happen at the holidays. If there's going to be a moment when someone gets drunk and creates havoc in their family, it will be on the holidays. If someone's going to be fired, it's going to happen at the holidays. If someone's going to take a fall, it's going to happen at the holidays. The holidays are hard for so many of us, and we have to be prepared.

And I am grateful for those opportunities to sit and walk with anybody who is going through any kind of difficulty during the holidays, because I have come to see those people as messengers and prophets. Because the truth of Christianity is that this world itself is going through difficulty. This world itself is out of kilter. This world itself is experiencing the throes of disease and death and disappointment. That is the nature of life. And it's important for us to see that because otherwise we cannot see the grace that God offers us in Jesus Christ. And so in order for us to truly understand the meaning of this coming Christmas, we have to understand that this world we live in is out of kilter and out of joint and full of difficulty and disappointment. Because otherwise we miss the good news.

And this is why our collect says, stir up your power, oh God, and come among us because we are so hindered by our sins. Let your boundless mercy come upon us. That good news of Christianity is that Christ has taken on all of these things in our world and is redeeming them through His death and resurrection. Christ is redeeming them by being born into our midst. Because we are not going to be saved by a magic wand that gets waved, but rather by a God who came amongst us and redeems human nature from within, and transforms the death we

experience, the disappointment we face, the disease we contend with, and all the things that oppose us in this life. Christ is renewing all of creation by coming to us as Emmanuel, as God with us, and that is the good news.

So this Christmas, I do not wish you any calamity. I wish you no disappointment. I want your Christmas dinners to go well. I don't want any fights at the table. And I want you to experience transformation here. But the good news of Christianity has nothing to do with how the holidays are observed. The good news of Christianity is Christ among us, and that is truly what we need.

Over the past few weeks, I've been thinking a lot about how this world is so out of kilter, and the list goes on and on these days. This used to be a longer argument back in the '90s. Now it's just short. I just say, isn't this world a mess? And everybody goes, yep. But we also have to plumb that too, because there's a lesson there as well. And one of the things that went through my mind, and it's something that I think is important for us to keep in mind, is one of the ways in which this world is out of kilter is that we have become a society of the spectacle. And by that I mean to draw from a French philosopher named Guy Debord, who wrote a book called "The Society of the Spectacle" in 1967.

And I know for many of you at home the minute I say French philosopher, you just like tune out. But hear him out. It's key. Debord says that what happens when we move from a society that reads or encounters one another in deep relationship, the minute we move to seeing our society through screens, that we begin to become captive to the representation of reality and not to reality itself. And so the more and more our life is organized according to screens, the more and more we become individuals held captive by impersonal powers. Because the whole point of anybody putting anything on a screen is actually to eliminate anything else except your rapt attention on what's on that screen.

And it doesn't matter - to jump things ahead from 1967. It doesn't matter if that screen is small like your cell phone, or if it's medium size like your computer, or if it is as large as the great television screens we have now, which are almost an immersive reality. In all of those screens, you don't see reality, you see a resemblance. And each of those screens in our lives are meant to rob you of your freedom, to deceive you about the nature of reality, and to keep you out of relationship. That is what it means to be a society of the spectacle. Because when you are simply dealing in those representations, clever marketers have realized that what really captures you is something that immediately offends you or fills you with fear, or creates some kind of ire or some kind of dread inside of you and you can't turn away.

This came home to me the other day because I was listening to CNN, which is always a bad idea, and they were reporting on the Mauna Loa volcano, which was particularly active. And of course in 2018 there was this incredible lava run

that swallowed up hundreds of homes. And so they know that there is a recent trauma that they can just touch, and they kept on saying over and over again, lava, lava, lava. And I'm listening to them and I'm thinking about Pompeii and the poor people struck down in the middle of their lives and I'm getting anxious. I'm having like a panic attack. I'm driving - lava, lava, lava.

And then I found out yesterday that the lava got only two miles away from the nearest built environment. They were just playing me. As much as I don't want anybody to lose their home to a volcano, as much as I want everybody to be safe, the whole purpose of that spectacle was to hold me captive and to keep me out of the challenges of everyday life, the reality that I would see, the relationships I have to live into, and the freedom to make a difference. You see my point.

Now, Christianity has an answer to that society of the spectacle. It doesn't try to somehow limit your screen time because you and I know that that doesn't work. But what Christianity invites us to is to see within that life that we have together in Christ, some kind of transformation that nothing else can do. Christianity rests upon that slow rhetoric of the sacraments and the gospel and Christian community to provide us with the capacity to be truly free. Because we become free not when we have unfettered choices, not when we can get on a screen and dial up whatever we want, because usually we will choose poorly. We become free when we do what we have been created to do. And that's true freedom.

And when Jesus came 2000 years ago, He gave us a ticket to freedom because we could know Him in a way that we cannot know anyone else in this world. And Christianity provides a kind of invitation to relationship. To not seeing just the mediation of a screen, but to actually live into that relationship; to have fights with one another and to make up; to say thank you, and I'm sorry.

And that relationship is real, which brings me to the third point that Christianity allows us to see reality for what it is, which is out of joint and broken and needing redemption. Now all of that is the gospel, and that's all of what we try to do at Advent and Christmas. We invite one another to remember that this world is broken and out of joint. And we listen to the messengers among us that remind us that it is broken and out of a joint. And we have the opportunity to let Christ be born in us again.

Phillips Brooks, the great pastor and hymn writer, at the last line of O Little Town of Bethlehem, says, "O little child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today." That is the good news of Christianity and that is the antidote to the disappointment we feel, to the death we are reminded of every day, to the diseases we struggle with, and to the difficulties we all face.

Today, I want you to follow Mary as we make our way to this Christmas. Mary is not for most Anglicans, a person we pray to. She's not a mediator, but she is a model. Mary is the first Christian because Christ is born in her. And so Mary is a model for us. We look to her to get an idea of how we can negotiate times of stress and difficulty. And I've put a couple of things before you to kind of paint the pictures of this model of Mary and this hope of Christianity and this avoidance of the spectacle today.

The first is on the cover of your bulletin, which is this round piece done by Fra Lippo Lippi and Fra Angelico. It was done in the 15th century. And if you look at that incredible piece, I love the fact that it's done in a circle, you have the visit of the Magi, which seems to be rushing things, and you're right. But of course we're about to do the Festival of Gifts, which is the traveling - that's the work of the Magi, the gifts, right? But on that, you see that the visitation of the Magi is not a spectacle, but they all enter through a narrow gate and they get off their horses, and they come and meet the Christ child who is there in great intimacy.

And the little Christ child in this picture is holding on to pomegranates, because that was an incredible image and medieval painting for the church. When you cut a pomegranate open, you'll see thousands of little seeds. For some people, this is a great turnoff. I enjoy it. I don't know why. It's meant to symbolize the church. Each of us, the thousands of us are held in the hands of Christ. And you have on top of the beautiful little manger there, peacocks, which are said to be symbols of resurrection, because it was said in medieval times that the flesh of a peacock would never taint or spoil or rot. And so peacocks are a reminder that the people who see and know Christ, they will experience transformation in life. They will participate in the resurrection.

And then there are the people in the back who are sitting among the ruins. And these are people who are half clothed. And people argue back and forth in the commentary of this that these represent maybe the dead being raised, or maybe the poor or the outcast who have been relegated to the tombs. And they have come out because they too are summoned and welcomed by Christ.

And finally, of course, there is Mary who is patient. Storing everything in her heart, as we read in the Gospel of Luke, the Christ child sits on her lap. And even though she is quite defenseless, she is able to make her way. This Christmas, may you see through the spectacle and find your way to reality. May you be liberated. May you find relationship. May it begin again in you.

The final image I want to share with you is this image that's an insert in your bulletin. It's a painting I found in Mexican Town in Detroit. I was driving along and doing some kind of work for the greater good. I can't remember what it was, but I saw this Mary and I was like, wow! I took a picture. And this is just maybe

something to hold in your mind as you go through the next couple of weeks to see this image of Mary as your model.

And on the back of it, I put a little excerpt from Thomas Merton from a poem he wrote called Hagia Sophia, which is a kind of praise of wisdom. But for Merton, he's trying to speak about Sophia as the wisdom of God, which is personified as a kind of divine energy that communicates God's mercy. And this is what Merton writes:

"Sophia is the mercy of God in us. She is the tenderness with which the infinitely mysterious power of pardon turns the darkness of our sins into the light of grace. She is the inexhaustible foundation of kindness and would almost seem to be in herself all mercy. So she does in us a greater work than that of Creation: the work of new being and grace, the work of pardon, the work of transformation from brightness to brightness tamquam a Domini Spiritu. She is in us the yielding and tender counterpart of the power, justice, and creative dynamism of the Father.

"Now, the blessed Virgin Mary is the one created being who enacts and shows forth in her life all that is hidden in Sophia... It is she, it is Mary, Sophia who in sadness and joy, with the full awareness of what she is doing, sets upon the Second Person, the Logos, a crown, which is His Human Nature. Thus, her consent opens the door of created nature, of time, of history to the word of God."

This Advent and Christmas, may you see things as they are. May you find space to find your way to the reality and relationship that God is bringing to you in Jesus Christ. And may you have the word of God that is Christ born in you as He was born in Mary.

Amen.