



CHRIST CHURCH CRANBROOK

"The Nativity Inside You" - Christmas Day - 12/25/2020

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.

Over the past few months I've been reading the writings of Howard Thurman, who was a 20th century mystic and civil rights activist, who was the spiritual father to most of the people in the civil rights movement that we know today. And Thurman has a meditation that has been very much in my mind over the past few months. His meditation goes like this:

In every person there is an inward sea, and in this inward sea there is an island and on that island there is an altar. And before that altar, there is an "angel with the flaming sword."

And that angel represents your personal authority. And nothing in this life can come onto that altar and take the place of worship without your consent, without that personal authority, without that angel letting it pass. And this, Thurman writes, is a critical link for us with the divine.

Now Thurman is trying to create a kind of spirituality of change and a kind of spirituality that was able to create within oneself, silence, and sanctity and peace while he was struggling against injustice, segregation, and racism. And that counsel of finding within myself an inward Island, an inward sea and an island and altar has sustained me. Today, I want to change it just a bit. I want to add one fold to this meditation and suggest to you that in each of us, there is a Nativity scene. In each of us, there is a manger. In each of us, there is a crèche, and in each of us, we have the opportunity to accept within that crèche, on that manger, in that Nativity scene, the child Jesus.

For you and I have within us a kind of need for a manger. We have a need for a new birth. We have a need for new creation. We have a need for new beginning. We have a need for a restoration. We have a need for resurrection. And the birth of Christ is a kind of reminder to us that there is a manger in all of us, a manger of our hearts, a crèche for our soul, a Nativity scene within ourselves.

In today's gospel, we read that the shepherds went looking for a manger. And in finding Christ in a manger, they worshiped him as their Lord and Savior. Each of

us already has a manger, and the question is, what is the shape of that Nativity scene? What does the Nativity scene inside us look like? And what does it mean for us to have Christ in the manger of our hearts?

W.H. Auden said this well; that in order for us to enter into the mystery of Christmas, we have to become like Mary, who must choose the child who has already chosen her. And this is a kind of freedom that we have with regard to the manger inside of us. We must choose to have the Christ who has already chosen us. This is our personal authority. This is the thing that we have to play in the great drama, the Nativity in our lives.

Now, I raise this for you because I believe that cultivating that manger today, that somehow making sure and engaging in a kind of imaginative prayer about what that Nativity within us looks like is the central task for us today. For like Thurman, we are in the midst of generating a kind of spiritual energy that is going to go beyond anything that can happen through politics or priorities or policies. For you and I are living in a time in which new spiritual energy has to come from us. And it has to come from a kind of revolution within us, a kind of change within us, a kind of renewal within us, a kind of rebirth in us. And all of these things are promised to us by the incarnate Christ, we meet the babe of Bethlehem.

And over the past 2000 years, there have been different ways in which people have envisioned the Nativity and put it in art so that we could somehow engage in a kind of process of going through our own self-examination and finding the place of Christ in us. And the first one that I want to lift before you today is one from a tapestry that we have as you walk into the church that was commissioned by George Booth in the 1920s, it's known as the Rule of Love.

And at the bottom center of that tapestry, there is this beautiful image of Nativity. And this is a classic image of the Nativity. You see Mary with a blue gown around her, and that is something that has been done for centuries because blue at one time was the most expensive color they could find in paintings. And that was a way of elevating Mary as the mother of God. And you see angels above her clothed with wings that are multi-colored and brilliant. And she is surrounded - the child, Jesus is surrounded by loving adoring people.

And this image of the Nativity is meant to create a kind of stability within you, a kind of reassurance that God is there, that the faith that has been passed onto you still holds water. It still leads you on. It still can be trusted. And that has an important work to do. But when we speak of the rule of love revealed in the incarnation, the love of Christ revealed in one who is born so that we may not die forever, but live to Christ, the one who came to save us, Jesus, we also have to think about what that rule of love looks like as we imagine different nativities.

Another Nativity I want to bring before you today is by Janet McKenzie. Mackenzie did this in 2015 as her own kind of response to the massacre that

happened at Mother Emanuel, African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. And this is called The Night Visitors. And here you see people of color gathered around a Christ of color. You see Mary looking up at the person, seeing this gathering wearily and watchfully and protectively of the Christ within her.

This Mary is protecting her baby, but she's also protecting the manger on which Christ is found. And this is an invitation for us to think about the rule of love that God has instituted through the incarnation of Christ and to think about the ways and to reflect on the ways that this Nativity might be ours as well, that this might be a Nativity that we have to welcome into our hearts and see each other differently.

Another image of Nativity I wanted to bring before you today is from the street artist, Banksy. And this was done in 2019 and placed in a hotel, right alongside a border that had been erected to keep the west bank separated from the rest of Israel, so that Palestinians could not engage in any kind of commerce with Israelis easily. And this image of the Nativity is called Scar of Bethlehem because the star of Bethlehem in this Nativity is a bullet hole that has been shot through the barrier between the west bank and Israel.

And this is a reminder to us of all the ways that sometimes our belief in God can be a way of dividing people and separating people. Sometimes we can allow things to mix into our understanding of Christ that does us no good, and can only be counter to the rule of love that God has established in Christ. So this Nativity is another invitation to self-reflection, an invitation to the ways in which sometimes we can be sucked into unhelpful thoughts and actions and practices and beliefs that do us no good and have no place inside our lives.

If you are like me, that exercise and imaginative prayer is an invitation to see yourself differently as beloved of God, to see your world differently as a place in which Christ is found in the face of each other, to have the opportunity to experience rebirth, and to feel your heart enlarge and your soul increase and your empathy to encompass more and more people until you begin to go with the grain of the love that God has given us in Christ, Jesus.

And over these past few years, you and I have had opportunities to reflect, not only on the Nativity that we've had in our transept, as you walk into this church and the narthex as you walk into the nave of the church, to speak more specifically, but there has been another practice that we've had at Christ Church Cranbrook of the Nativity. And it's been the drama of Nativity, a kind of festival of gifts, and which our youth have gotten together and composed themselves and put on costumes and played parts in the Nativity play and created a living crèche in which many people would walk by and take pictures and look at loved ones and offer gifts for those who have need in Pontiac and Detroit.

This is a tradition that has carried on since 1929. And it is a kind of living reminder of the Nativity that each of us must do internally. Each of us has to make a journey every year to go through the drama of the Nativity and to see how that reflects the Nativity within us, how that experience of Christ in the liturgy around us can awaken to us the Christ who is asleep in our mangers. The Christ who must be roused, the Christ, who must be embraced, the Christ who must be delighted in, the Christ who must be worshiped.

And this year I have had as a kind of stimulus to my prayer, a kind of trigger to my emotions, a kind of confirmation of the work that I had done, another kind of performance of festival of gifts, because this year we had to reimagine what that service would look like because we could not gather safely inside. And so we created a festival of gifts that went outside the church and our youth stepped forward with incredible bravery and determination to play their role in a tradition that had been going on for more than 90 years. And they were brave and they were heroes and they were fearless. And they proclaimed the good news of God and Christ.

So one of the things that I've been reflecting on as I've been thinking about the Nativity within myself, has been the images of the Nativity I've seen in our youth, because I have seen shepherds in a field waiting for Christ to come and to hear a message from the angels. I have seen angels delivering a message of good news to us that Christ is born. I have seen Magi making their way to Bethlehem, to worship the babe who was born there under the star. And I have seen an innkeeper who has been incredibly charitable, even though he had no room to find some place for the Christ child to be born and for the holy family to lay.

And I have seen the Holy family. I've seen the Holy family waiting patiently and peacefully resting while thousands came and brought gifts and adoration in the form of the cars that came by. This year has been a year in which we have done more than we ever have to reach out to others around us. And this festival of gifts was a kind of sacrament that revealed in so many ways, the generosity of this parish, which has stepped forward in ways that we never could imagine before.

And so this year we contributed 1300 gifts to so many families in Pontiac and Detroit who are now having a brighter Christmas thanks to your generosity and the generosity of this congregation. To the \$10,000 that we donated to help those agencies that we work with, reach out to those who have been battered and affected by this pandemic who have struggled to make ends meet. We have been able to see in this image of the Nativity, the new life that Christ is inviting us to make. And this has been an inspiration to me, an invitation to transformation to find the Nativity inside of me.

I want to finish today with a poem that invites and brings to a head this invitation to engage in imaginative prayer, to think through all the ways that God is

seeking to do new things inside of each of us today, to look for the ways that new birth might come and to look for the ways we might invite the holy family inside one more time.

The poem is from Daniel Ladinsky who did a rendition of some mystical poems written by Saint John of the Cross. And it goes like 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.

Yes, there, under the dome of your being,
does creation come into existence eternally,
through your womb, dear pilgrim,
the sacred womb of 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!

I need shelter for the night. Please take me inside your heart. My time is so close.
This Christmas, may you welcome the Virgin into your heart. May Christ be born
in you. May you experience new life. May you protect the manger of your soul
and may this new life and light and love lead you. Amen.

[End of Recording]