

ONE WHOM YOU DO NOT KNOW

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
December 13, 2020

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

One of the loveliest things about Christmas is that for once in the year we can soak ourselves, for a little while, anyway, in the *familiar*. In a world where everything is always changing, where so much of what once we took for granted now seems up for grabs, what a relief for a few weeks to be surrounded by the familiar: the trees and wreaths and candles and Christmas balls; to set out the familiar crèche, to listen to the old familiar carols, to move back into the familiar customs of the season, rituals we have followed in our families for years, some of them handed down over generations. It's a season when we can actually soak ourselves in the familiar and flee for a bit this increasingly strange and alien world of ours.

But there is a shadow side to all this soaking of ourselves in the familiar. If we're not careful it can actually lead us *away* from God. For the central event we celebrate at Christmas, that we await eagerly during these four weeks of Advent, is the breaking into our mundane world of the mysterious, unimaginable God: the One who defies description in human language, so great is the chasm between creator and creatures. As the old hymn puts it:

*Immortal, invisible, God only wise,
In light inaccessible hid from our eyes,
Most blessed, most glorious, the Ancient of Days,
Almighty, victorious, Thy great name we praise.*

In taking on the form of a child, God begins a decisive chapter in the long history of God's reaching out to humankind, one that will shatter all the familiar ways of thinking about God. The Christ-Event is intended to shake us up—transform us into what we were created to be. Yet when we cloth it in all the familiar customs and music and decorations, we are tempted to think of God as *safe*, as recognizable.

After all, what could be safer than putting God into a replica of a baby and tucking it into the straw of a manger in a crèche! We are even tempted to gurgle and babble as we do over any newborn baby and to think of the God-child as cuddly or cute. Or what could be safer than to dress up our children in what we think of as the costumes of biblical times, pick out the perkier child for the role of Mary, place a doll in her arms, and hide a flashlight somewhere so that the face of the doll will glow.

I'm not knocking efforts to reenact the lovely story. The trouble is, the lovelier the effect of the pageantry, the more it may stand in the way of our recognizing the child as a stranger.

This is why Christmas is far more dangerous as a festival than Easter. At Easter you can't very well snuggle up to the resurrected Lord! We can try to put the garden and

the empty tomb into a pageant, but it never quite comes off, does it? There's a mystery in Easter which we find troublesome to put our dramatic fingers on. There's a strangeness about the resurrection which eludes and baffles us. Of course, we can domesticate Easter—and we do!—by identifying it with spring and flowers and the fresh green fields and turn it into a kind of annual nature festival with bunnies and colored eggs and marshmallow chicks. But Christmas is something else. It so easily becomes sentimental because it has to do with a child, and who doesn't love and recognize a tiny child? We may even get tears in our eyes at Christmas and start pitying him, for Pete's sake! Because we think we know what it's all about. An innocent child—so lovely! What a shame he has to grow up and face a world like ours. So we hang on to the illusion of the child, because at least we think we know what it's like to be a child in a world like this.

But really, for all the sentiment—and the sentiment is quite honest much of the time—this feeling of familiarity with the child, this feeling that here we are safe when contemplating God, is only a clue as to what goes on all year round.

There's the feeling of security in having God safely in some place: in a church, in a sunset, in a book. As at Christmas, it gives us a warm glow to think that we know where God is, and how and when we can get at God. It's as if we had God on speed dial. Or if it's not a physical place, we wrap him in the swaddling clothes of an impossible ideal like peace on earth, or liberty and justice for all, or universal human rights. Or, perhaps, we package the Holy One in statements that we can affirm: Jesus Christ is the Son of God; I believe in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. And so long as it remains something you can agree to or debate, it's safe, you know? It's familiar—like the child in the manger.

But in this morning's lesson from the first chapter of the Fourth Gospel, John the Baptist announces the breaking in of a stranger: "Among you stands one whom you do not know..." Unrecognized, different, strange. Breaking out of our neat little holy places, because where he is, every place is sacred, holy; shattering our safe and impossible ideals because he lives them out in unpredictable ways; bursting our safe, neat propositional statements because how can you possibly package fire and life and love and hope and judgment? "Among you stands one whom you do not know..."

And that was true all his life through. At his birth do not be misled by the marvelous stories of the star, the angels, the shepherds, the wise men; these were written after the church had recognized him for what he really was. But at his birth he was a peasant's child—no more than that. And during his life there were fleeting moments of recognition by John the Baptist, the disciples, followers, even maybe some of the Pharisees. But when it was over, "They all forsook him and fled." A stranger still. And even after the resurrection, Mary thought him no more than the gardener in the graveyard, and those two on the road to Emmaus talked with him for a while and didn't come close to recognizing him. From beginning to end it is the story of a stranger.

And the one who comes at Christmas is still a stranger. Maybe it would help if in white churches a black baby would be lying in a manger, and in black churches a white baby. At least it might shake us up a bit to realize the strangeness of God's ways with us. One of my seminary professors, James Cone, used to say that "we've got to stop worshiping a cute white baby and recognize the adult, black revolutionary that Christ

was.” Cone and other “liberation theologians” have challenged the church to recall how radically the historical Jesus questioned the established order of things in his world. Of course, Christ, of whatever color, was far more than a mere revolutionary, white or black. But thinking of Jesus as someone disreputable, immoderate, dangerous may be closer to the truth than being moved to sentimental feelings of pity or whatever by the sight of a baby lying in straw.

For, as Frederick Buechner has pointed out, we’re closer to the truth if we recognize God’s sheer vulgarity! “The vulgarity of a God who adorns the sky at sunrise and sundown with colors no decent painter would dream of placing together...the vulgarity of a God who created a world full of hybrids like us—half ape, half human—and who keeps breaking into the muck of this world. The vulgarity of a God who was born into a cave among hicks and the steaming dung of beasts only to grow up and die on a cross between crooks.”¹

Of course, we’ve prettied up Jesus so, we miss the actual revulsion he caused among good respectable church people like us during his life. Because he went about eating dinner with whores and crooks and racketeers and traitors. He was strange to the people of his time—strange! Of course, the common people heard him gladly just because he was strange, so different from the correct, law-abiding religious leaders. But even the common people, at the end, lost faith and trust and cried out for Barabbas, the revolutionary, rather than Jesus when the choice was offered to them.

But then God has always come to us in strange ways and in strange people: from Moses the murderer on the run, who stuttered and had trouble getting out two words in a row, to Amos the strange clown from the hills of Tekoa preaching to the sophisticated people of Samaria, to John the Baptist in his strange leather get-up, eating locusts and wild honey out in the desert, to Jesus, the stranger from Nazareth.

That’s why I get so upset by the close-mindedness of some who call themselves Christians, those self-proclaimed defenders of the faith whose first concern seems always to be how someone else is towing the line of conventional morality and belief. They can be so ready to pronouncement judgment—God’s judgment—on those who are different, the outsiders and strangers, to want to exclude, to neutralize them, to prescribe violence even to defend what they see as a God-given culture and way of life. We like to call Jesus the familiar One, the Prince of Peace! Well, is peace better served by enforcing conformity or accommodating—welcoming—diversity? I think the answer is clear, and that’s why Union Church has room for everyone who hears the call to worship this Prince of Peace—no matter what your age or gender or income or political persuasion or sexual orientation. That’s why we *make* room for everyone—intentionally practice inclusivity—even when it’s not always comfortable or natural. For we know God has *always* used outsiders, strangers, people who don’t fit the mold to renew the communities of God’s people because, apparently, God does not trust us—whether the Christians of America or the Jews of ancient times—to renew ourselves from the inside out.

So, we think we recognize God in the form of the child at Christmas? Maybe so. But not until we have sensed the strangeness of the child. Because this is the strange glory of God at Christmas—the reason for the star, the wise men, the shepherds, the

¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 67.

angels flooding the sky with song—because they all symbolize the strange mystery of God whom we cannot control or package or wrap in swaddling clothes and put him where he’s safe. Recognizable. Familiar. It’s the mystery of his coming to us in the stranger, in the manger. The glory of the Lord shone round about them precisely because someone different had come, someone not subject to our control or even to the control of death.

So—lift up your heads, your faces, your voices, and sing! *Sur-sum Corda*: Lift up your hearts! Join the angel chorus and shout to high heaven, “Glory to the newborn King. Peace on earth, and mercy mild, God and sinners reconciled!” Because the stranger has come to dwell with us to save us from ourselves.

Now to the God of all wisdom, who strengthens us according to the gospel, through Jesus Christ be all glory forever. Amen.