

Colossians 1.15-20

Luke 1.26-38, 46-55

“Incarnation”

Since it is almost Christmas, and I am sure many of you are on the verge of a Christmas meltdown, ready to throw down with the next person who cuts you off in line. Ready to kick in the speakers of the next store that is playing Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. Trust me, I get it, I am there with you. So, I thought this morning it would be nice to begin with a story that may give you some sense of peace in this crazy season. This is the story of Saint Nicholas, yes that Saint Nicholas. He was a 4th century bishop in Turkey, already famous for giving out presents to those in need, but then in 325 he received a call by Emperor Constantine, the first Christian emperor of Rome. Nicholas answered the call sent out to all the bishops to appear at the first council of Nicaea, in order to draft a statement of faith, the first Creed of the Church. This would be the first ecumenical council called to bring order and unity of belief to the faith, which had been so divided when it was forced to exist in the shadows.

The purpose of this council was to define who Christ is, because the controversy surrounding the person of Christ had become so bitter that the Emperor felt it needed to be resolved. The controversy revolved around a priest named Arius who was teaching that the incarnate Christ was a creation of God the Father, that Jesus, while like God, was still only a creature who could not be the same as God. For Arius there was a time when Christ, the incarnate, was not. This may sound nitpicky at first, over nonessentials, but it means that the person we meet in the flesh of Jesus, is not our God. He is someone like God, maybe, but not God our Creator. These are not the debates of theologians, disconnected from normal life, in

ivory towers, but essentials, we declare that the person that we meet in Jesus is our only God and no one else. Arius convinced many of his understanding of Christ, and sent out missionaries to spread his teachings. So at the council of Nicaea, when this was to finally be decided, there was a very real possibility that the Arian understanding would be declared orthodoxy. Even Constantine's son and future successor was an Arian Christian.

But then, during the council proceedings, our hero, Saint Nicholas, became so agitated hearing Arius call his Lord a creation, not equal to God. He could no longer bear to hear Arius attack what he believed to be essential to the faith, so he stood up, crossed the room, and punched Arius right in the face. If that does not get you into the holiday spirit nothing will. Santa, rained blows upon Arius because he denied the incarnation of our God. But it was illegal for anyone to strike another in the presence of the Emperor, so Nicholas was thrown into jail, stripped of his position as bishop, so that he would not be present for the final decision. Ultimately the council sided with Nicholas, declaring Arianism a heresy, and exiled all the Arian bishops. Nicholas was restored as bishop, and from that council we have our Nicene Creed, which declares to us that Jesus Christ, is our incarnate God. By reciting it, we declare that in Jesus we find our God, and no one else. We affirm that within the humility of Christ, we also find our eternal God. In the Christ who we meet in time, we also find the God who is before all time.

This morning let us hear the Good News of Christ, who was ever-present with the Father, begotten not made, very God from very God, who is fully divine but who also saw fit to take on human flesh, to take on human weakness and made it proper to Himself. Making human nature no longer alien and apart but part of the identity of our God who comes to us in our flesh. Let us hear the Good News of our God who reigns over all creation and came down into it. In Christ we

do not meet a part of God, something close to God, in Christ we meet our God. The God who is mighty and meek in the infant Lord. We meet in the humanity of Christ, the divinity of God. Let us hear the Good News of the God who would not remain separated from us, not in our sinfulness, not in our flesh, let us stand in awe of the God who comes to us, mysterious and yet known. So, brothers and sisters, let us turn to the text from Luke, and gaze upon the face of our incarnate Savior. Let us gaze upon the human face of our Savior, and see the fullness of God.

In our reading from Luke this morning, we hear the familiar story. The angel coming to the young Mary, declaring, “The Lord is with you”. And Mary perplexed at the angel’s words, wondering what sort of greeting this was. But from these first few lines, it feels like there is something missing. So often when we find angelic visitations, we immediately find that phrase “do not be afraid”, it is always the first thing said when they arrive on the scene. But for Luke this phrase is conspicuously absent from the initial greeting. The order must be purposeful, we get no sense that she is afraid, but instead she is confused because the angel declared, “the Lord is with you”. It seems like this is the last thing that should occupy Mary’s mind, but it isn’t, it is her immediate reaction. And when we ponder her reaction, we can almost hear the internal dialogue.

What do you mean the Lord is with me? I am a woman, treated as an inferior, among an occupied people. What does it even mean to have God with us? Where is our God, how can I see Him among the suffering of my people? I am a nobody among a people of nobodies, if God was ever with us, He has long since departed. If God is somehow still with us, there is no way He is with me. The presence of the Lord is not here.

Mary’s silent pondering, her internal dialogue is finally broken, by the angel telling this young girl, the phrase we all know so well, do not be afraid. Because he is about to tell her

something that should make her very afraid, she will conceive a child, not with her husband to be, and He will reign over a kingdom which will have no end, a kingdom which is obviously not the one her people had become so familiar with. The only question that Mary can come up with is “how can this be, since I am a virgin”. Even though so many other questions must have been swirling through her head, how can this be, how will I survive, how is my child going to become a king, how will this kingdom have no end? The only question she can even vocalize is, how will this happen? All of those public service videos were pretty clear about where babies come from. And the answer that the angel gives, still does not exactly make sense of her very technical question. What does make sense of her question, of all the questions she had but could not speak, is not how this is going to happen, but who this child is. This child will be the Son of God. The God who is able to bring life to the womb of the virgin and the womb of the barren, life to all of mankind. For there is nothing that is impossible with God, not even the incarnation.

It is not impossible for God to become human, really human, to take on the humanity that so many of us try so desperately to leave behind. We distinguish between what is godly and what is godless, what is good and what is evil, what is noble and what is common. We try desperately to divorce ourselves from what is so human, from the parts of ourselves which remind us of that genealogy we read last week. But God takes on all of it, descending into what is really human, into the real world against all of its accusers, even when we are those accusers of human nature. God penetrates into the nature, body, guilt and suffering of humanity. God enters into human existence, into the life of the most modest, the most humble and lowly life of Mary. God enters into the most obscure place, and it is in the obscurity of this young mother, in the meekness of the manger, that God lets Himself be found. God enters into the manger made of dirt and clay, in the body of flesh and blood, accompanied by the announcement of angels. It is here, that we can

know God, where we can see God's presence. No longer as the vague idea of His presence, no longer a cloud, or the fear inducing presence, which brings death, but in the eyes of a child who brings us life. God became a child, here He is poor like us, miserable and helpless like us, flesh and blood like us. And yet He is God, He is might. In the might of His love, God bridges the chasm between Himself and humankind, He overcomes sin and death, He awakens the dead, bring life where none exists, and where none should rightly exist. We are called before this miserable manger, before the child of poverty, to stammer the words of faith, Mighty God, who is with us. The Mighty God, who is both exalted and humbled.

We bow before the manger and declare this child, Jesus, is Mighty God, the fullness of God, equal to God, who became human in order to free humanity from eternal death. We proclaim that He remained what He was, and took on what He was not. In perfect unity, both together without overwhelming His humility or diminishing His majesty. In one person, God's majesty takes up humility, God's strength takes up weakness, eternity take up mortality. That is the angel's answer to Mary's question, he tells Mary, that it is this paradox, who is coming, and He is able to come because He is God. He is the God who is able to take on humanity without being diminished, He is the God who is found in the meekness of an unwed mother, the humility of humanity. So, Mary says to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". No longer does Mary ponder the Lord's presence, thinking it impossible that the Lord would come to someone like her. She is the lowly and detested servant, ready to see the presence of God, with her. She is ready to witness the paradoxical incarnation, coming into the world, to rule forever.

It is this incarnation of God, coming into the world, to reign forever, the Good News of the meek Messiah, that allows Mary, the lowly unmarried girl, the Jew who is living in an

occupied land, to sing the Magnificat. The wild song, that rejoices in God, my Savior, who looks on the lowliness of humanity as anything but. My Savior comes in the fullness of divinity, which Nicholas punched Arius to defend, and my Savior comes in the humiliation of humanity, which His teenage mother proclaims. My Savior comes in meekness and exaltation, without confusion or separation, but as One Holy Christ, One Mighty God. My Savior has come to the lowly and to the hungry, so that we all might take possession of the incarnate Christ, who is being born for us, given to us, the God I know, the God I love, whom I belong to, and who belongs to me. So that we all might sing “Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me”.