

ὁ λόγος παρακλήσεως
Christmas C-1; 24 December 2018
St. Thomas, Glassboro – Todd Foster

Christmas Eve

In nomine...

I. Intro

I'd like to begin by recounting a time I did *not* feel the holiday spirit. It was in my local Post Office when I lived in the Bronx. My wife and toddler and I were at the Passport window. We were having an encounter with the apparatus of our Federal Government. Do you know what I'm talking about?

We were applying for a passport for our toddler, Aviva. Both of us had cleared our schedule that morning so we could be both be present. We had studied the State Department website and brought all the required documentation. We had filled out the passport application and brought the required photos. We did everything we could to make the process simple and easy for us, for our squirming toddler, and for the person at the Passport Window. They demanded our marriage certificate. Our what? Our marriage certificate. We had read the materials thoroughly and come fully prepared. Nowhere did the guidelines suggest we needed to bring our marriage certificate. But this federal agent insisted that our application could not be processed and called for the next person in line.

Now I don't know what was going on that morning. Perhaps I was anxious about something else as well. But I was seething. I was really angry. I had done my best and was trying to navigate my way through the bureaucracy. But it turned out I was getting pushed around, helpless to achieve what I had set out to do.

II. Thesis

Everyone gets pushed around by life. Some of us are more aware of it than others. With enough money and enough power, you can sometimes deflect a lot of that pushing and even tell

yourself that you're immune to it. If you're really determined, maybe you can choose blindness and delusion and avoid it forever: I don't know!

But eventually life pushes back. It's called aging. Or a stock market crash. A failure in business. Or a failure in an important relationship. It might be an aging parent. Or the entrapment of addiction, whether in your own life or in that of someone close to you. It could be illness or fatigue or unreasonable bosses, an unreliable friend, an aging car or a weather event or you name it. What's going on in your life today? What is that thing that you wanted to escape by coming to church tonight? That thing you'd rather leave behind and enjoy Christmas instead? That thing you just can't shake loose and you wouldn't be caught dead letting others know about it?

Yeah, that thing.

III. Good News

So here's the good news. Christmas isn't just about the birth of a little baby. We like that story, but it's really just a minor detail. Two of the four Gospel don't mention Jesus' birth or childhood! The big deal here is what we call the "Incarnation:" God becoming flesh.

Why does that matter? Because God did something amazing. God came to change the world, and God chose to do so by being born to a family so poor that they were sleeping out with the animals.

Look at the contrast between Caesar Augustus, pushing people around like pawns, and the baby Jesus, born in a stable far from his hometown. Which one was more powerful? Which one was going to change the world more completely?

We know who won in the end! I'm a Christian, not an Augustinian. There are Augustinians around today, but they are orders within the Anglican and Roman Catholic churches. They are followers of Augustine of Hippo, a Christian saint from Africa! Jesus continues to shape the world in radical, subversive ways. But Jesus does that not by pushing people around and exercising power like Augustus. Jesus did it then by submitting himself to the process of childbirth, infant-hood, and life as a child subject to all the mistakes and challenges of his

young, peasant parents. Jesus knew what it meant to be pushed around, from his very birth in a barn in Bethlehem. Jesus knew pain. Jesus knew failure. Jesus knew disappointment. Jesus knew illness and rejection and injustice. Jesus knew betrayal. Jesus even discovered death firsthand.

And what Jesus did was show us that none of this stuff gets the last word in God's world. None of it needs to be feared or worried over. That thing you're going through that feels like such a big deal? It may be a big deal, but Jesus is an even bigger deal. And Jesus helps bring perspective, wisdom, and healing to all the other things in life. Jesus may not make the pain go away. Jesus stood wailing at Lazarus' tomb. But Jesus will join you in your grief and ultimately console you with the promise of a better day. No pain or loss is beyond Jesus' capacity to redeem it.

IV. Invitation

What does this mean? It means that that circumstance that's hanging over you – it's only temporary. God's love is stronger and more permanent than the worst you can face. That failure for which you have only yourself to blame? God loves you despite. That thing that caught hold of you and just won't let you go, hanging on like a monkey on your back? Incarnation. God is still on your team, ready to walk with you right through that abyss and out again: into God's loving arms.

Wherever you've been, whatever you've done, you are not beyond the loving embrace of God. God isn't concerned about your grades or your SAT scores. God is not concerned about your performance review or your job title. God may be concerned about your failures or your hangups or your peccadillos – but only because you see those as things that separate you from God, and God doesn't agree.

God really doesn't agree. God doesn't agree so much that Jesus was born into the world to share with us all the challenges of being human. God was on a mission to show us a) that God loves us and b) that nothing can separate us from the love of God. Even death is just another doorway through which we enter into a closer relationship with God.

If you're here tonight wondering what all the hubbub is about, it's not complicated. God loves you. Jesus was born so that he could show you how much God loves you. Jesus died to show that even death is no barrier to God's love for you, and that you are held securely in God's hands exactly to the degree that you allow yourself to be held. No more – because God loves you. And no less – because God loves you.

Here at St. Thomas', we're on a journey together, *learning* how to be held *more* rather than *less*. We're on a journey to learn how to love one another, to love the world around us, and to love ourselves. We're on a journey to learn how to love Jesus, because it is through Jesus that all other loves find their perfection.

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After I stood there in the Post Office stewing for a few minutes, wondering what to do next, we got called back up to the window. They didn't need our marriage certificate after all. Our application was accepted and we went on our way. I spent the rest of the day marveling at the depth of upset that was stirred up in my heart.

That upset was indicative of a heart that was beholden to circumstances and systems over which I had no control. It was a clue that God was at work in my heart, showing me yet another chain from which God wanted to liberate me. It's a long process. That's why we keep celebrating Christmas over and over again, every year.

Christmas Eve is about the gift of God, the love of God, that came into the world and dwelt among us. May you find God's love for you in a significant new way tonight and in the days and months to come. May you find God's love in community and in solitude, in joy and in sorrow, in life and in death. Because Jesus knows all of those places. He's been there. And he is still there, right beside you.

Amen.

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