

December 2, 2007

St. John's Episcopal Parish

Sermon preached by Deacon Chris McManus

Thirteen years ago I was at the School for Deacons and was to preach before the students and faculty at Sunday Eucharist. It was about this same time of year, and I began my sermon by saying, "It is Advent, and so we are pregnant with God.

And despite the fact that I don't believe in recycling sermons, I can't think of a better way to begin today. It is Advent, and we are pregnant with God. This is the ninth month of that pregnancy, and, just like with any pregnancy—you men will have to take this on faith—we can become very aware of God's presence within; we are waiting eagerly for the birth, and are imagining what will come into being.

The first time I became pregnant, I was 16—17 when my daughter was born. And I knew that I was not going to be able to keep my daughter, but would have to relinquish her. I didn't want to do it, but didn't really have any choice.

It was very important to me that she have some sense of her true identity and that she know I loved her and didn't abandon her willingly. I couldn't bear the idea that she might believe she was not loved or wanted. I didn't really have any conventional tools for communicating with her, so I just focused my attention and intention and my love and desire to care for her very intently for the seven and a half months or so that I was aware of her presence inside me. I tried to feel her with my insides and tried to send her these messages.

After she was born, they took her to the nursery—this was 42 years ago—and for the five days that I was in the hospital, I went down to the nursery each day and stood at the window looking at her, still trying to send her these messages—to imprint myself on her and vice versa. On the last day they let me hold her and dress her in clothes I had knitted for her.

And you know what? It worked! When I found her seven years ago, I recognized her. I don't mean her physical appearance, although she is so like her father. But I'm saying my being recognized her being. My bones, my organs, my cells knew her because she lived inside my body and I felt her and spoke to her through my body. It was like John the Baptist "recognizing" Jesus while still in the womb.

And she had received my message. Her first gift to me was a small plaque that says, "A mother's love makes all the difference."

I tell you this story because it is a good analogy for how we communicate with God. We can't see God. We can't touch God. We can't just pick up the phone to call God. We communicate with God in our inmost being, in our thoughts, our feelings, our focused attention, our just listening.

These four weeks leading to Christmas are our opportunity to focus inward on God, living inside us—to find that place where we know we love God and we know God loves us and we learn to recognize God's presence in a way that is not bound to our senses. That is our most important task during Advent.

Our other focus in Advent, just as with any pregnancy, is toward the future, toward what we call in Christendom the Second Coming, the Reign of God, the Messianic Age, the New Jerusalem. There are lots of terms used for this concept of a time of justice and peace, when warfare, poverty and exploitation would cease to exist and God's blessings would be obvious everywhere.

Mary knew this. While she was pregnant with Jesus she sings this praise hymn about God lifting up the poor and bringing down those who oppress them, of feeding the hungry and turning away the rich. She understood the ultimate point of the Messiah was not just to have a baby but to change the world.

The Gospels talk about the Second Coming. The whole 24th chapter of Matthew, from which we read today's Gospel, is a series of prophecies about the Second Coming. In fact, just before today's passage is a verse which C. S.

Lewis called the most embarrassing in the Bible: Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this generation shall not pass away until all these things have taken place.”

Jesus’ disciples and most of the early Christians expected him to return in their lifetime to usher in this new era that we read about in the Isaiah passage this morning. Yet even though one of the signs Jesus discussed—the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem—took place in 70 A.D., Jesus did not return in glory in the clouds to usher in Reign of God. We have not turned our swords into plowshares. We clearly have not abandoned war in favor of feeding people.

So what does the Second Coming mean? For what are we supposed to be ready? I don’t know, but I will tell you what I do know.

Today is the fifth anniversary of my mother’s death. The Christmas just after her death, my father came up here to spend the holidays with us. Now my father was raised Roman Catholic, but had left the church some 35 years before, angry over the discrepancies he saw between Jesus’ life and the actions of the church. Although my mother had maintained a faith in God, my father had not. And now his wife of 55 years was gone.

So at one point, my dad turned to me and said, “Do you really believe in God?”

And I said, “Well, I believe in love.”

And he said, “Oh, I believe in love.”

The Christian therapist, spiritual director and writer Gerald May said, “healing always involves an increase in love.” I believe we are capable of loving more and thereby participating with God in healing creation. On this point I disagree with the Beatles. At least I hope they were wrong when they said, “And in the end, the love you take is equal to the love you make.”

I hope, rather, that the love we make can be much greater than the love we take. Out of that deep interior time in which we learn to know and recognize

God with our whole being, comes an increase in love, that comes out of us in concrete ways that change the world.

As long as I am still capable of being more loving, I don't really need to know what the Second Coming will look like or when it will happen or if it is literal or figurative. I can just focus on loving more, loving better, feeding the hungry, taking care of sick people and poor people. And I'm convinced I'll be working with God in that, so coming again becomes pretty irrelevant. How can you have again, when you have always?

Yesterday several women of the church met for a day of reflection. We looked at a number of poems, scriptures and other material pertaining to Advent, as well as various views of the Second Coming. At the back of the church, I've provided copies of all the material we used, so that everyone can have this for your own reflection during the Advent season. At the end is a form for you to write down how you're going to manifest God's love through action during the coming year. I urge you to really think about this between now and Christmas, and to make this promised action your Christmas gift to your fellow creatures.

Then maybe we will write a letter to Paul McCartney and say, "Hey Paul, here at St. John's parish in Clayton, we're makin' way more love than we're takin'—and it's not "The End"; it's only the beginning." Amen.