

SERMON FOR YEAR C, CHRISTMAS 1

JOHN 1:1-18

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“INFLATED”

In south Texas I had a neighbor – a good man,
And apparently a real lover of the holidays.
His yard was a sight to behold:
Maybe twenty pieces of December-themed paraphernalia,
Most of which had to be constantly inflated or lit up by some external force,
And most of which was about as tall as me, or taller.

There was a manger scene made of rope lights,
A snowman, a globe, a toy soldier, and no fewer than four Saint Nicks.
(My favorite being the one that kept popping up out of the chimney.)
A friend who lived near me told me she'd driven by and thought Santa Claus had thrown up.

All things considered, I adapted pretty well
And even came to enjoy the sight
Of an inflated Santa being comically squashed by an obese, inflated reindeer.
That's just the breaks of being a good neighbor
And having a little local color.
Evenings at our house, when it was usually dark and quiet, were made brighter
By the visitation of these spirits.

Mornings, though, were a different story.
At some point during the night,
The generator that provided air and light to this festive menagerie was turned off,
And a holiday-themed *front* yard became a holiday-themed *graveyard*,
Or the scene of a grisly and bizarre balloon murder spree,
Where now-deflated fabric shells lay flat on the ground,
Waiting, helplessly, to be reanimated.
Some mornings, I recall, were even a little foggy
As to lend the feel of a horror-film set to the whole scene.
I found myself starting my car and trying to drive off as quietly as I could,
Lest I wake the dead.

The whole scene brings to mind the stark dualism of the American Christmas Experience:
A lot of flash and very little substance,
A gorgeously wrapped but ultimately empty package,
A living symbol of something good and lasting
From about the twenty-fifth of November to the twenty-fifth of December,
And even now a faint memory until the next buying season –
A confusion of Hallmark-Disney-McDonald's commercialism
Where we allow market forces to manipulate our emotions
And control our spending habits.

Please don't get me wrong: Presents are good. Gifts are great.
But there's a difference we need to perceive – we who claim the mantle of Christ.
That difference has everything to do with what is both Forever ... and Now.

The great claim of this holy season of Christmas –
And here is part of what sets Christianity apart from all other religions –
The great claim of this season is that God *chose* the Human Experience
Of flesh, viscera, stable muck, winter thunderstorms, and warm mother's milk.
God *chose* the life of instability, loss, and impermanence –
A life that would be grounded, specific, painful, and brief.

That claim, that choice, is about two things.
First, it is about *kairos* – God's time, divine time, divine will, actively choosing the good
And embracing all creation by this incredible action.
Second, it is about *chronos* – our time, our ordinariness, our specificity.
That claim is about those two kinds of time intermingling
And made manifest in a whole person we dare to call God's Son.

In Jesus, our time *becomes* God's time.
We are captured and transformed by it.

Imagine how revolutionary an idea that would have been to the readers of John,
And how strange it is that we so easily accept it.

We would be foolish to consider that the Incarnation
Has only to do with God somehow stooping, *deigning* to be with us
Or coming to provide just a mechanical substitute for our sins, Part B for Part A.
Not that we shouldn't exercise humility in the face of it all,
But still ...that somehow strikes me as a lack of imagination.
And if not just that ... then what?

The insertion of God's time into our time
Is about receiving instruction in how to live, and then living it.
The teacher is here before us now,
Quivering newborn gooseflesh lying in a stone-cut manger
In a shed in some back alley in some podunk town.
God is subtle that way.

If it were up to us, we'd run right past it.

But God is also into writing it out in broad letters
That no one should miss it:
“*Here* is your teacher, the one who will save you.
Follow him in word and deed.”

So we listen for the hidden breath of angels.
We look into a night sky painted with light just behind the snow-storm clouds,
And find a star that makes it so obvious that something new is happening.
We hear of governments trembling at the name of the Teacher.
We see men of wisdom packing their bags with gifts
And taking a dangerous journey across a desolate landscape.

When God's time and our time become one time, better watch out.

The first decade of this new American century has undoubtedly been a hard one,
Marked by hardship and worry – instability, loss, and impermanence.
I'm kind of glad it's over.
You know, you can only have that kind of life for so long
Before you start to feel ... well, honestly, a little deflated.
Now more than ever we need a sense of hope;
We need new life, a little animation, some strength for the journey.

But we don't have to look very far for that life, do we?

Let us, then, be as God intends –
What we cannot *help* but be:
Those who attend to the collision of God's time and our time.

Maybe it's a bit crass to say we're a lot of lawn ornaments,
But when I ponder it I can't help but see the connections.
We need air; we need energy;
And we need one another,
Because as my neighbor discovered, why stop at one when twenty will do?

It's okay for us to want to just stop and breathe a little this morning.
We could sure use the air.

The Christ child gives us reason to pause,
And to hope for better days.

Amen.