

Joining the Circus

from the pulpit of
Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church
Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania
by
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First Sunday of Christmas

Isaiah 63:7-9

⁷I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, and the great favor to the house of Israel that he has shown them according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love. ⁸For he said, “Surely they are my people, children who will not deal falsely”; and he became their savior ⁹in all their distress. It was no messenger or angel but his presence that saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.

Hebrews 2:10-18

It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings. ¹¹For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, ¹²saying, ‘I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.’ ¹³And again, ‘I will put my trust in him.’ And again, ‘Here am I and the children whom God has given me.’ ¹⁴ Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death. ¹⁶For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people. ¹⁸Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.

The Prophet Isaiah proclaims that God is the “high and lofty One who inhabits eternity.” (57:15) The Psalmist declares “for the Lord is a great God, and the great King above all gods.” (95:3)

The Hebrew scriptures are full of exalted names for God: El Shaddai—The Lord Almighty, Jehovah Sabaoth—The Lord of Hosts, El Olam—The Everlasting God. It’s all there. Sovereign language, praising the One who is deeper and wider and more majestic than our imagination can even dream up.

Which I suppose is all good and well, until we are scandalized by the notion that this same God, the very maker of time itself, not only entered time, but did so in a rather pathetic way: lowly, helpless, as a baby born to an unwed teenager, out in the sticks of the Roman Empire. Far from any center of power, with a feeding trough as a makeshift throne.

Now what kind of God is that?

By the time we get to Matthew’s gospel, we recall another name for God, of course. It’s there that an angel of the Lord reminds that salt-of-the-earth carpenter Joseph that it was Isaiah who promised, “‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call him Emmanuel,’ which means ‘God with us.’” (1:23) Theologians call this the *incarnation*. The indwelling of God in a human body.

Why did God come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth? What does his birth mean? Where does the story point? How can God truly come among us in the mess of that animal shed in Bethlehem? If there is anything to say on the first Sunday after December 25th, it is to attempt an answer to these questions.

This is always an interesting Sunday to preach. It’s kind of the batting cleanup Sunday. The big Christmas Eve crowds are gone. Most of the presents have been opened, meals cleaned up, family has left (or at least we hope they will). The Hallmark Channel eases off its Christmas movie marathon, and begins to

resume its regular programming. And the folks who run on the seasonal adrenaline high start to feel the letdown of the post-holiday roar. They begin to feel the way the poinsettias have started to look...a little sad.

But this is also always the Sunday where we get to the heart of the matter.
Who is Jesus, really?

The Letter to the Hebrews makes the case that he is the faithful high priest, who by his suffering offers himself as a sacrificial lamb before the Lord God. And the Gospels sing out even more: that in his life is the only life; in his death is the final death; and in his rising comes all of our rising.

I think he's also the face that haunts our dreams, because his face, whether we know it or not, is the one all of us seek. A face that knows our names, and our broken lives, our dysfunctional families, our health scares, our scars, our hopes and dreams.

And it is surely worth noting that we have been arguing about who Jesus is, and why he has come, since the disciples first jockeyed for position at his right hand, and then stood dumbfounded when he talked about what it would cost them.

Our creeds and confessions try to squeak out truths about him that will not be contained in words, but we say them anyhow. *Eternally Begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God...Conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried...the Mediator between God and man...the Heir of all things and Judge of the world.*

Yet it is perhaps that stunted line in the Apostle's Creed that haunts me the most out of all our many words about him. Trapped between semi-colons it sneaks up on us after his crucifixion and burial:

He descended into hell. It's a line with biblical origin in 1 Peter, describing Jesus' journey into Hades to offer salvation there before his resurrection. *He descended into hell.*

The first time I ever thought of that sentence in any meaningful way took place during Holy Week, several years back. It was a Monday when the call came. I was in my study preparing for Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and Easter worship.

A distraught mother, and member of the church I served, called to share that she discovered her son, David, had just taken his own life in their backyard. David and I were both the same age, 28 years old.

While Abby and I had just found out we were expecting, David had a three-year-old daughter and a toxic relationship with his ex-wife. He was a veteran of the war on terror in Afghanistan and Iraq, and struggled with PTSD in ways that still break my heart to remember.

I arrived alongside the police, and together a lieutenant and I held what felt like the fullness of time between us as we stood over what happened.

After what I recall was a hasty and poorly uttered prayer, I made my way inside the house to the family. In the hours that followed, I stood in for the One who is always the first on the scene.

When the family requested David's funeral to be held that Saturday, Holy Saturday, the day before Resurrection Sunday, I knew what must be said. On the day when the Creed says Jesus *descended into hell*, what else could I say for someone who took his own life because he himself could not see beyond the hell of it all?

When David found himself in the depths of such despair, it was Jesus who not only went with him, but who also held him at the end, and brought him home too, to rest eternally with him, to be healed to completeness from the brokenness of life.

How do I know this? Because according to the gospels and the Letter to Hebrews, Jesus suffered like all of us have, and then some.

The Church Father, Gregory of Nazianzus said of Jesus, “That which he has not assumed, he has not healed.”¹ Which is an inverse way of saying that for Jesus to deliver us from whatever hell we find ourselves in, he must first go there himself.

Princeton theologian Dan Migliore writes, “If God in Christ is not present to us in the depths of our human finitude, misery, and godforsakenness, then whatever this person may have said or done, he cannot be the Savior of human beings, who know finitude, misery, and godforsakenness all too well.

If God in Christ does not enter into solidarity with the hell of our human condition, we remain without deliverance and without hope...the full humanity of Jesus is the precondition of the inclusiveness of his salvation.”²

All of which means there is nowhere we can go, no depth of despair to which we can descend, that Jesus himself will not travel to find and rescue us.

To be sure, his rescue may be as harrowing as that from which we are being delivered, but in his embrace we can rest, as the old hymn says, “leaning on the everlasting arms.”

If all of this sounds like cheap sentimentality, perhaps that is partially true. I suppose that’s the Christmas paradox of it; there is a human limit to how we can describe what God has done for us in Bethlehem, what we long to be true.

¹ Gregory of Nazianzus, Epistle 101, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. Edward R. Hardy, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954) 218.

² Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology, Second Ed.* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004) 175.

But that doesn't mean we haven't tried to express it down through the centuries: from Handel and Caravaggio and Shakespeare and John Donne, to John Rutter and Maya Angelou and Mumford & Sons and Marilynne Robinson; poetry, prose, music and art declaring the soul-filled hope that our universal human longings are met in the face of the One who came and lived and died and yet lives again.

It is sentimental because it is all I know. It sounds cheap because I'm confident I know very little. Yet there is a richness here that transcends even my doleful muttering. In Jesus of Nazareth dwells the fullness of God. He is divinity and humanity residing together.

He is the source of my hope; that God always gets the last word, and that the last word is life.

He is my sense of justice; challenging me to give voice to those whom history and culture have long silenced. He is Lord of this Church, and Lord of all creation. He holds our pasts and our futures.

He is Emmanuel, God with us, all of us, whether we are together or apart. I trust my life and the lives of my children to him, and I believe you can do the same. You can lean on him in times of trouble. He will be a ballast in your storm. In his name we are freed to love one another, and sent out to work for the peace and reconciliation of the world.

And yet I'm aware that while my words may sound cheap, to follow him is costly. Frederick Buechner says it this way:

If the world is sane, Jesus is mad as a hatter and the Last Supper is the Mad Tea Party. The world says, Mind your own business, and Jesus says, There is no such thing as your own business. The world says, Follow the wisest course and be a success, and Jesus says, Follow me and be crucified. The world says, Drive carefully—the life you save may be your own—and Jesus says, Whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

*The world says, Law and order, and Jesus says, Love. The world says Get, and Jesus says, Give. In terms of the world's sanity, Jesus is crazy as a coot, and anybody who thinks they can follow him without being a little crazy too is laboring less under a cross than under a delusion.*³

Buechner has a point. The notion that anyone might *choose* to follow Jesus seems as ludicrous as if we had said to the world we were running off to join the circus. But I wonder if it's always been the other way around. That Jesus has actually come to join our circus.

By his birth to irrelevant peasants in a powerless place, and his life of ministry and compassion, all culminating in his suffering and death, he took on the reality of our ironic, comical, and tragic lives. He knows what a spectacle life can be. Yet, my understanding of the Gospels tells me that in the circus that is my own life, Jesus is not the ringleader, nor even a lead performer.

To borrow a metaphor from Henri Nouwen, Jesus is the catcher in our flying trapeze acts of life. The one who prompts us to jump...to act and speak and pray and comfort and protest and declare and weep and rejoice.

He is the one who tells us: Do not be afraid. To trust that we will always find safety in him. To live and move and have our being in God's unfathomable love for us. That's why he came. That's who Jesus is. Emmanuel—God-with-us.

And that's not only Good News, it's the best news I could think to give you. Amen.

³ Frederick Buechner, *The Faces of Jesus: A Life Story*, (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2005) 61.