

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor
Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent, December 20, 2009
Genesis 8:20-22, Hosea 11:8-9, Luke 2:7, John 1:14, Mark 15:37-39

THE HEART OF CHRISTMAS

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” That’s astounding: that the baby laid to rest in a manger (a cattle feeding trough) represents and even embodies God to us. The very truth in which God created the universe and gave life to all that lives, that truth became mortal flesh and lived among us *as one of us*. And it is vitally important that we know he not only lived among us but did indeed share our humanity itself and become one of us, living daily under the conditions that make human life both joyous and grievous, wonderful and desperate, pleasant and painful.

Recently in our online Bible study, we were talking about Jesus’ telling us not to pass judgment upon each other, and one of the participants reminded us of the admonition not to judge a person without first walking a mile in his or her shoes. The Son of God has walked far more than a mile in our shoes, and he did it in sandals, never knowing the many modern comforts and conveniences we take for granted. More important than the relative hardships of life in that time when Jesus walked among us are the conditions and limitations of our humanity that are not changed by modern technology. We still rejoice in our gains and mourn our losses. We still aspire to become more than we can truly be, even as we sink to lower levels than the rightful humanity God created us to enjoy and fulfill.

It is our tragedy that we long to become more than human, but our over-reaching causes us to become less than human. We reach for more power than we should have, and what we attain is cruelty. We seek to rise above our feelings and emotions so we can leave behind the urges of the flesh, the embarrassments of our bodies, and the disappointments of love lost and hope unrewarded; but instead of escaping emotional pain, we lose empathy with each other and so grow cold and emotionally isolated. Wishing never to cry again, we remove ourselves from the human companionship we need to be truly living. It is emotionally draining to let people get to us, to let their sufferings move us and disturb our own equilibrium, but without this person-to-person resonance we call empathy, we lose our humanity and our connection with God.

Look at most of Christendom’s paintings called Madonnas – the ones that show Mary holding the baby Jesus. They may be great paintings, but they get their subject all wrong. In many of them, mother and child are not even looking at each other, and in most, we see

no emotion. Mary looks Stoic, her face lifeless, and the infant Jesus looks regal but without feeling. The paintings picture their era's vision of the divine wearing a cover or disguise of human flesh. They do not show the real faces of real people. Because in those times when people painted Madonnas that way, God was supposed to be emotionless and infinitely above being moved by any joy or suffering on earth, the empathic void thought to be divine is presented on the faces of mother and child.

Contrast these Stoic Madonnas with the actual interplay of facial expression between a living, loving mother and her baby. They gaze into each other's eyes, and the baby learns to reflect her mother's emotional expressions. Affect psychologists tell us this face-to-face time of love shared is the beginning of the child's emotional learning and development of empathy. The mother, who is simply enjoying the time with her child and getting to know her, is helping to give that child the gift of caring, responsive humanity. Recently, I have seen two photographs of members of our church that show this bonding and emotional learning process beautifully. One portrays a grandmother with her infant granddaughter who is most intent upon looking into her face, the other a woman holding an orphaned baby who is equally intent on gazing into her emotionally accepting face. That's what a true Madonna should show us: not a Stoic mother with an stiffly regal infant, but the empathic bonding – the love – between mother and child.

I am not attempting a critique of art. My concern is not with the paintings as such but, rather, with the theology they represent – the misunderstanding of God. Jesus came to set us right about God's passionate commitment to us and caring for us. What the prophets had told us, Jesus showed us and, indeed, embodied for us: that God is never indifferent and that God created us to love and longs for our response so that, loving God in answer to God's love for us, we will learn to respect and care for each other. The mother or father who teaches their child empathy is thereby teaching that child to be truly human with God and with other people. This world's cruelty, brutality, and indifference all flow from a lack of empathy with others. We dehumanize, and then we destroy, whether our cruelty manifests itself in actual killing and torture or in coldly brutal economic policies or in the racism and bigotry that spoil so much of American life. Lack of empathy – the uncaring face and spirit – breeds the evils in human life. The refusal to be moved by the sufferings of others does not reflect the nature of God; it reflects the power of evil.

The heart of Christmas is, for lack of better words, the human heart of God present for us. That's why it is so important that when Jesus came face to face with people, what he felt was not contempt for them but compassion. He showed respect to people others dismissed as worthless or even damnable. He confronted people with choices for God's grace they never expected to be given. Even to those who infuriated him with their self-righteous judgments that blocked other people from God's redemptive love, Jesus gave

chances to change their minds, open their hearts, and rejoice with God at the healing of the sick, the mending of the broken, the restoration of the shameful, and the forgiveness of the sinful. He came because God will not stop caring about us and longing for our response.

Near the end of the story of Noah and the Great Flood, God takes a fresh look at humanity but comes to the same understanding: the human heart wills evil from childhood. These human creatures seem almost born to be cruel, born to hurt each other and themselves, born for the clash of egos that spoils their lives and corrupts God's world. But, God chooses to preserve the natural order and work with this unruly creature created to know God and represent God's grace and truth in this world. Right there, the shadow of the cross falls upon the pages of Genesis. When God commits willingly to loving a world of people that won't willingly love God back or care for each other beyond the limits of their self-interest, God becomes bound to get hurt and hurt badly. As long as God refuses either to impose obedience by force or to turn away and give up on us, God is headed for trouble. Ask anyone who has experienced how it feels to love a person who remains indifferent or even resents being loved.

Hosea gives us an even deeper look into the heart of God. *I have every reason and every right to be furious with you, and I am so angry I could destroy you, with pleasure. But no, I can't do it, because I cannot give you up.* Cannot? God cannot? Will not, cannot, what's the difference to love? Now we know what God's heart is: it is broken but unwilling to quit.

"Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last." The Incarnation of God's Son is completed when his body of flesh is broken for us. The heart of Christmas is the broken heart of God that will not let us go into oblivion, will not forget us, will not go on through eternity without us. "How can I give you up?" God asks with all the pathos of a grieving parent. *How can I let anger and judgment have the final word **about you**?* "I am God and not a human, the Holy One in your midst, and I will not come to destroy."

God will not stop caring about you, will not stop longing for your trust and love in return, will not go away and leave you alone, will not forget you. That's the promise we affirm when we celebrate Christmas in spirit and in truth. Our calling is to represent in our flesh-and-blood bodies and in our human interactions God's redemptive love for others, as Jesus has represented it fully for us. That's what it means to be Christ's church: not to preserve a set of truths and keep them safe from human questions and doubts, not to guard the sacred mysteries from the dirty hands of real people, but to be Jesus' own empathic, caring, compassionate presence in this world. He became vulnerable because God is never indifferent. Into a world that worships power and calls cruelty strong, came the living embodiment of God's true power which is not power at all but self-giving love. Amen.