

Concrete Christmas

Christmas Eve – Titus 2:11-14

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, December 24, 2014

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Merry Christmas!

In case you haven't been here for our Advent journey this year, or if you haven't been here *much*, you might not know that I have been talking about that journey with stories from a journey *I* took just before the start of the Advent season. Some may be glad to hear that, at least for a little while, I have only one more story I want to share from that journey courtesy of the Interstate system and Greyhound Bus Lines.

Actually, I might just as well have heard the conversation at the McDonald's across the street here as at the one in Mt. Vernon, Illinois, just a couple hours from the completion of my trip. I was actually kind of frustrated that we were stopping for a meal break so close to my own destination, but I got off the bus anyway, moved as quickly as possible to the order line, and sat down with my sandwich and fries.

There was a family in the booth next to mine, a little girl of four or five, with her mom and her dad, talking about the birth of a new child into their family. The mom's condition made it obvious that the blessed event was imminent, and since I have kind of an occupational interest in Christmas babies, I listened to their conversation more closely than I might have otherwise. It's just as well that I did, actually, because the little girl's mouth was going ninety-something miles per hour regarding her soon-to-be family addition.

This appeared to be the continuation of a good many *other* conversations over the last few months, as the father asked the little girl if she was excited about having a new baby in the house. She quickly answered in the affirmative, and began her seemingly oft-repeated litany of all the fun she and the baby would have together. Her mother then asked her a question that made me think their family might be in the "we don't want to know" camp of modern family planning: "If it were up to you," she said, "would you like to have a baby brother, or a baby sister?" The words weren't even out of Mommy's mouth when the little one shouted in well-practiced shrills that filled the little serving area, "a baby brother, of course!" (I quickly reassessed my previous conclusion about their family planning – I figure the room was already painted blue.)

Then the little girl's Daddy threw her one she had apparently never heard before. "Of all the little boys in your class at school," he asked, "which one would you most like your brother to be like?" Where there had previously been one long string of chatter, there was now a stoney silence. The little bundle of verbal energy seemed stopped cold by that one. After what seemed like a full two minutes of thought, she finally looked up at her father quite seriously, and said, "I think I want a *sister*."

Until that very moment, I think, the idea of the new baby had been an abstract idea to the little girl, as her mind had filled – or *been* filled – with all the fairy tale versions of living life with her new brother. When confronted with the living day-in and day-out, three dimensional, *concrete reality* of having a brother, her perspective changed a bit.

Six thousand years ago, or six *million* years ago, or six *billion* years ago, God created everything that we have ever known. He breathed his own life into creatures created with the capacity to love him and to love one another, and he set us in time, to give us, I have said many times over the last few weeks, the *room* to live, the room to *learn*, most especially, the room to learn to *love*. We knew from the beginning, and when we stop the chatter long enough to think about it, we know now, that we are not self-contained, that we owe our being to someone outside our selves. But from Chapter Three of everything, we have had a hard time wrapping our minds around the simple fact of God's love for us. The too-abstract

concept of God has, over and over, both fascinated us and baffled us, and over and over, we have reached for, and clamored after, and grasped hold of something more tangible, more *concrete*.

The almighty rescued his chosen from bondage and carried them through the sea on dry land. But the first thing they did was pound gold into a concrete calf. “Love me,” God said, “and love each other.” “But can’t you chisel a few suggestions...er, commandments into stone for us.” Judges and and kings and prophets called the people to obey the God who was at work in their history, to serve the God who was provided for their lives, to worship the God who continued to enliven their hearts. But whenever the going got tough, or whenever the going got *good*, we carved a Baal or an Astarte or a Zeus or a Jupiter, or an ethnic identity, or a national narrative, or a fiscal policy, something, *anything*, to reach for, to clamor after, to grasp hold of, something, *anything* more *concrete*.

And then God did it. God *became* as concrete as we needed him to be. The Divine Source overshadowed a young woman, and she became the bearer of the tangible reality of God come into our space and into our time. The Word of God, living and real *before* time, the Word of God, responsible for the creation of absolutely everything there is, the Word of God became concrete *flesh*, *our* flesh. God’s Word, held in the abstract for so long, God’s Word engraved in the Law, God’s Word revealed to the prophets, God’s Word spoken in the whirlwind and in the still small voice, God became *human* flesh. In the very concrete flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, the eternal Word of God came to live and learn and love, as one of us. In the very concrete flesh of Jesus, God came to *be* one of us.

The problem is that for many of us, the concept of Christ’s coming is still cast in the abstract. That little girl’s father was profound in asking his daughter to think of faces and people when deciding who she would like as her brother. We’re the same fickle creatures, you see, as those Hebrews and those Israelites and those Pharisees that we like to cluck our tongues at. We are fully *capable* of letting the Hallmark consumer sweetness of our cultural celebration sweep us up into a fairy tale Christmas just long enough for them to clear out the candy and the candles and the kitsch to make room for the garden supplies. We can *make do* with a Christ that was a bisque-baked-baby for one night, and then somehow instantly became an adult prophet. We can *settle* for an abstract deity we can worship from afar. But know this, friends – *God* made no such settlement.

The one who made us knew, you see, that we *might* be able to *obey* a theoretical diety. We *might* be able to *serve* the intangibly divine. We *might* even be able to *worship* God in the abstract. But little girls aren’t able to *love* abstract little brothers – because we weren’t created to *love* an *abstract* God. The maker of all things, the light of all creation, the eternal Word of God, loved us enough to have a face and a name. And that name is Jesus! “For the grace of God,” Paul said, “*has* appeared, bringing salvation to all... while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ.”

Christ *has* come. In *our* space. In *our* time. In our very *substance*. He has been made concretely real... for *you*, and for me. May we make *him* concretely real... in our world.

Merry Christmas!