

Sermon
Christmas 1
St. Andrew's, Methuen
December 27, 2020
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Isaiah 61:10-62:3
Psalm 147 or 147:13-21
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7
John 1:1-18

Every story, if you want to understand it fully, requires that we know its context.

Take a one line story: "Mary has a little lamb." Depending on the context, this story could have very different meanings.

Maybe Mary lives on a farm and her father gives her a little lamb to take care of for her birthday.

Or it could be that Mary lives in the city and one night her mother gave her a little lamb for dinner.

If we want to understand the Christmas story there are at least three contexts we need to see:

The first is the smallest we usually focus on: Mary, Joseph and the Baby Jesus. And maybe a few shepherds and animals.

But there's more: the gospels of Luke and Matthew also give us the story within the bigger context of the people of Israel living under the domination of the Roman Empire. Luke places the birth under the oppressive rule of Caesar Augustus in Rome, while Matthew reminds us that Jesus is born under the tyranny and brutality of King Herod, who tries to kill the Christ child.

I have a friend who collects all sorts of creche scenes—from traditional to contemporary—**but none of them includes the figure of Caesar or Herod, so it is easy to forget this larger political context.**

Therefore, the story of Jesus many people carry around with them is disconnected from the situations of real people and instead morphs into a story about a flying elf and winter fairy lands of snow—a fairy tale **that comes at the end of each year to rescue commercial capitalism.**

Fortunately, Luke and Matthew's Christmas stories save us from such an empty Christmas by not letting us forget that **God sends Christ to**

judge all leaders who ignore the poor, the immigrant, and the outcast and care only for themselves.

It's why we must always see **the creche and the cross together** for you can't look at the cross and not see the Power of the State killing the Son of God.

In Christ's birth and death, we see the One who comes to establish restorative justice and peace in every home, town council, state and national government.

But today's gospel gives us the biggest context of all:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us."

This is the Cosmic context in which the Creator, the Ground of all Being, full of goodness, beauty, and truth, holds everything and everyone in being, and becomes flesh in Jesus, in order to wake us up to the Divine Life from whom we live and move and have our being.

The whole creation—from subatomic particles to the largest galaxies come into being through the Word and are held in being by the Word. The whole creation is the temple of God, and into this temple the Word becomes flesh to call us back to our true selves and our highest purpose.

Jesus, the one closest to the Father's heart, reveals who God is for us, and he reveals who we are for God, the daughters and sons of God, created in the image of God.

When we read the Christmas story knowing all three contexts—the family, the political, the cosmic—the story has the power to transform the darkest places in which people live.

I think here of the medium security prison at the big roundabout in Concord. For three years before the pandemic, I'd go every third Thursday night to lead a Bible study in the Roman Catholic chapel in the prison.

After going through the security check where you have to take off your shoes, coat, and belt, and pass through a metal detector, you pass through a couple of doors and then a long hall and before you are outside in the middle of the compound. In front of you is a low square building built into

the ground with several large skylights sticking up. That building holds a protestant chapel, a mosque, and the Roman Catholic Chapel.

When you walk into the Catholic Chapel immediately on your left is a statue of Mother Theresa who visited there back in the 1980s; then you see on the back wall a large Greek Orthodox icon of the resurrection in which the Risen Jesus is rescuing Adam and Eve from their prison in Hades. He has hold of their wrists as he lifts them, who represent us, out of Hades to join him in the Resurrection Life. Hades the jailor is now in shackles buried under the cross.

Along the left-hand side of the nave are a large three-dimensional Stations of the Cross. The writing on them I think is in Polish. At the front is the altar sitting under a skylight. During Christmas the guys put up a fully decorated Christmas tree to the right of the altar.

On Sundays about 50 guys come for Holy Eucharist. At the Bible study we'd have between 5 and 15 in attendance.

Some of these men are new to faith, struggling to see if there is a God who could love and heal such broken people. Others are like monks who for years have been reading their Bibles for hours a day and participating in all the events offered by the Catholic deacon, who is on staff, and those offered by many volunteers.

These guys are those who are free on the inside, while being incarcerated on the outside.

One of them in the Thursday night Bible study, says their mission in prison is to be "portals of Christ"... to other inmates who see themselves as hopeless and lost.

You and I are also portals of Christ. Through our brokenness Christ is born in us so his light may shine in the world.

It is the full story of the Word become flesh in a Jew, born in first century Palestine under oppressive Caesar and King, and then 30 years later, convicted as criminal and heretic and crucified under Pontius Pilate.

When we know the whole context of the Jesus story, we find there is a third meaning to "Mary had a little lamb": Mary is the one chosen by God to give birth to Jesus, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sins of the world, restoring all people—all people—to one another and to God: Creator, Christ, and Spirit.