

**SERMON**  
**St. John's Episcopal Church, Roanoke, VA**  
**The Rev. Alexander H. Webb II ("Sandy"), Associate to the Rector**  
**January 1, 2012**

<b>The First Sunday after Christmas</b> <b>Matthew 2:13-23</b>
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In the Name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

I am frustrated.

Since well before Thanksgiving, I have been feverishly changing the radio stations in my car in the hope of avoiding the Christmas music that was so gratuitously played before the big day. But, now, on this eighth day of Christmas, I want it to be Christmas! I want to hear songs about teams of flying reindeer, about snowmen that begin to dance around, and about fat men in red suits who break into your house in the middle of the night.

It's the week after Christmas, for goodness' sake, and we should be acting like it!

For the world around us, it is as though nothing ever happened. For six weeks, we anticipated the Christmas festival, and then in the twinkling of an eye, we moved on to the next thing. It is as though nothing ever happened.

But, something did happen. Something truly remarkable happened, and as people of faith, our challenge is to figure out what it means to live on the day *after* Christmas, and on the day after that, and on the day after that. Our question is what Christmas means for the rest of our lives.

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There are single moments that have the power to change forever the courses of our lives.

Consider the moment in which you finished your schooling. After years and years of toil and struggle, you were no longer a student. The celebrations were grand.

Consider the moment in which you married. After years and years of hoping and praying, you finally had a family of your own. Nothing could spoil the day.

Consider the moment in which your first child was born. After years of wondering and months of waiting, you see your very own child with your very own eyes for the very first time. Joy fills the room.

In a moment, the courses of our lives can change forever, but in the twinkling of an eye, those very moments fade away.

With gifts and gusto, we celebrate these life-changing moments. But, once the celebrations are over, the specter of reality closes back in on us. New graduates have to find jobs, newlyweds need to learn

how to live together as one, and new parents need to figure out how to care for this tiny little life in the midst of their home. We cannot pretend that nothing has happened.

The courses of our lives can change in a moment. But, in the moments that follow, we need to be about the difficult work of living into our new reality. We need to be about the difficult work of figuring out what those changes mean for us and for our futures.

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The birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem of Judea was one of those life-changing, reality-reshaping moments for all of humanity.

In one single moment, God came to dwell within the confines of his own creation. He took on flesh, and absorbed into himself the sin of the world, so that he could go about the work of redeeming it all.<sup>1</sup> In one single moment, God forever changed the nature of reality.

More than anyone else, Mary and Joseph knew what God was doing: They knew what the angel had told them. They knew what the prophets had foretold. And, they knew that in *their midst*, God was reforming the entire world.<sup>2</sup>

But, once the celebrations had waned, once the shepherds and the wise men had departed, Mary and Joseph had to figure out what to do next. They, like we, had to figure out how to live on the day *after* Christmas, and the day after that, and the day after that.

Mary and Joseph could have pretended that nothing had ever happened. But, they knew that something truly remarkable had happened. They knew that God had made his earthly mission dependent on their faithfulness. They knew that the world was being changed right in front of them.

As the specter of reality closed in, and the threat of Herod's henchmen was disclosed, the Holy Family fled into Egypt. After a long journey, under abominable conditions, Mary and Joseph returned not home, but became refugees in yet another foreign land. They will remain in Egypt until the death of Herod.

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Mary and Joseph were the first people to understand fully what it means to live in the tension of what is and what will be.<sup>3</sup> With the birth of Christ, God inaugurated a new reality in which love would always win out over self-interest. But, before the Holy Child even made it out of Bethlehem, Herod threatens to block everything that God was about, and thousands of innocent children lose their lives.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf., 1 Corinthians 15:22. St. Paul presents Jesus as the antitype of Adam; his obedience brings life to all in the same way that Adam's sin brought death to all.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., Matthew 1:20-21.

<sup>3</sup> St. Augustine of Hippo explicates this tension in the conflict between the City of Man and the City of God in his famous treatise, *City of God*.

Evil remained. Evil remained, and God's plan for salvation came to rely on the faithful obedience of Mary and Joseph, two very ordinary people doing the very ordinary work of raising a child. In the short run, it seems as though Herod has won the day, driving the Holy Family out of his kingdom for the rest of his life. But, Herod dies. Death has the last word in the story of Herod the king, but death will *not* have the last word in the story of Jesus the Christ.

Beginning in Bethlehem, and continuing to this day, the kingdom of God is breaking into the world little by little. The kingdom of God is breaking into the world through the faithfulness and obedience of ordinary people like you and like me.

God chose to come to earth in the form of a baby, not a warrior. God chose to persuade with words, not swords. God chose to concern himself with the long-run salvation of the world rather than short-run victories over one-time despots. God chose to give ordinary people a role to play in the story of redemption.

It's the eighth day of Christmas. It's the end of the world as we know it, and the beginning of the world as we will some day know it.

We have choices to make: We can pretend that nothing ever happened, and go on living our lives according to the ways of the world. Or, we can claim our identities as participants in the revolutionary work that God is doing in the world. We can proclaim that something truly remarkable has happened, and that something truly remarkable is happening still.

It's the first Sunday after Christmas. Something truly remarkable has happened, and we need to act like it.

Amen.