

Incarnation Here and Now

From the series: The Presence of the Future

Text: John 1:14; I John 4:12; 16

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Advent season is a season whose theme traditionally has been "The One who came is coming again." A main emphasis in the Christian tradition and a clear biblical teaching is that the one who was born in poverty and humility is the child who will return in power and glory to judge the nations and issue in the end and the consummation.

On the second Sunday in Advent, I suggested to you that we have to rethink that: that Jesus is *not* coming again in that sense. As someone said to me, "You're not usually that dogmatic." I said, "Well, I'm not usually that sure." Well, I didn't say that. Nancy said to me, "Why do you say things like that? You don't know everything." Amen.

But, I said it the way I said it because I wanted you to hear me. I could be the perfect heretic and preach all my life and you would never know it. All one has to do is fudge a bit, use vague terms, dance around, and I don't want to do that. I'm too old; I've got too little time left. I want to be simple and I want to be clear. I do not think that the Christian model, the biblical model of history coming to an end with the appearing of the Lord from the clouds of heaven is, as a matter of fact, the way it's going to be. I think history is going to continue to unfold and to develop, and going I know not where. But it is a part of a cosmic process of 15 billion years, unfolding in this cosmic wonder and majesty all those years, until finally there was the arrival of the human, the unfolding, then, of the story of history, even to the present moment, and I do not know where it is going, but I suggested to you that the good news is that, though I don't expect Jesus to come from the clouds of glory, Jesus *has* come. Jesus has come again and again and again, and the key to our understanding, I believe, a more profound biblical understanding beneath that structure of things is a sense of Immanuel, God with us, here and now.

Thus, Jesus with us, in spirit. "If you ask anything in my name, I will pray the Father, and God will give you the Spirit, the advocate, one to stand with you, one who will lead you into all truth, one who will call to remembrance the things that

I have said." And so, the present has within it the seeds of the future. The present is pregnant with the future. The vast potential beyond our conception is already incubated in the present, in the cosmos, in our history, in our humanity. But that future that is already in our present, is always under threat.

We noted last week that the future that is trying to be born is always threatened by the present establishment for, if we have achieved a position of prestige and power and affluence, why in the world would we work for the transformation of tomorrow? And that's the story of human history. As I said last week, if nature is red in tooth and claw, then human history is a veritable river of blood, violence and destruction, war and death, most often because the future that is trying to be born will be crucified by the present that is established and very happy with the way things are.

Herod, on the throne, wanted to hear nothing of a royal child that might threaten his position and so, not being able to find the child, simply decreed that all children two years of age and under should be slaughtered. The Slaughter of the Innocents is the subtitle of the story of history. It has always been thus, for the future that would be born, the dawn that would break in this unfolding story of history which is the unfolding development of the cosmic reality, will always be threatened by those who would vie for power and position and stifle the spirit and crucify tomorrow. That's human history.

But, that's not the whole story. If we are not to wait for someone to come and clean up our mess, then, as I said to you last week in concluding, it is *our* responsibility. History is *our* responsibility. The future is *our* responsibility. It is for us who have caught a glimpse of the vision, who've dared to dream the dream, to engage in the ongoing story, to stand for justice and righteousness, to live with compassion and to work for peace. The transformation of tomorrow is incubated in today and it is our task to midwife it into birth.

The old model, that really doesn't work anymore because it's inconsistent with our experience of history and our knowledge of the cosmos, the old model would have us at this season of the year look for the big event somewhere out in the future, another place and another time. My Advent theme is a plea to you to find it here and now. Incarnation here and now. For that is the radical and profound declaration of the Gospel - that God has been embodied in human flesh.

In the beginning was the word, reminding us of the first chapter of Genesis, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." John, in telling the story of Jesus, is trying to connect the whole cosmic reality from the beginning with that historical manifestation in the midst. The Creator of the heavens and the earth is embodied and enfleshed in the humanness of Jesus. The word became flesh and dwelt among us. Incarnation, here and now. Human history now manifesting divinity in the concrete. Paul said we have seen the light of the knowledge of God in the face of Jesus Christ. Jesus, in John's Gospel, is purported to say, "If you have seen me, you have seen the Father." The

incarnation here and now in human history, and the image that Paul uses in his letter of the body of Christ simply says that that was not a one time happening. That was not a once-for-all-event. That was an emergence into history which continues in the body of Christ, where *you* are the body of Christ, *you* are the flesh of God in the world. You are the concrete manifestation of God in this marvelous, awesome, wonderful, unraveling of cosmos and history and humanity. Incarnation, here and now. The big event is not in the future. The future is incubated in the present and the present is pregnant with the future, and it's for us to allow it to come to birth. That's our task as humankind, in history, the children of the Big Bang, stardust children of cosmic reality manifesting our life in an ongoing story of history.

I don't want you to lose the moment. I don't want you to live with anything less than awe and wonder at the gift of life and the marvel of the ongoing drama. How can I speak with such glowing terms on the Sunday after the week through which we have just lived?

As I thought about this message and I thought about Christmas and incarnation, I was all too well aware that, unless something is said this morning about the debacle that has been played out in our midst as a nation, then I will simply give credence to the widespread sense that the pulpit is the epitome of irrelevancy. But, how does one speak about the crisis of our times? How does one speak with some objectivity and sensitivity without partisan bias? It's impossible. So, let me warn you at the beginning that anything I say is no word from the Lord; I have no word from the Lord. Let me speak about it, however, as one responsible to say something in the face of that which faces us, is in our face. Someone who simply broods on these things and muses on these things, let me say a word, if I may, and let me share with you something that's been very helpful to me in giving me some perspective.

Andrew Sullivan is a journalist. He writes in *The New York Times Magazine* of October 11 a marvelous article in which he addresses the present situation and, although he is himself a liberal, he speaks very fondly of Conservatism at its best and the great tradition of Conservatism historically. He suggests that the Conservative movement today is betraying itself and its own finest principles. Let me read you a few paragraphs, even though I know that's a boring exercise, but it says it better than I can say it, and I want it said here. Speaking about the Conservatives, he says,

... Conservatives have always been concerned with morality - and rightly so. They have long understood that political order rests upon a vibrant civil society, and on the morality that such a society sustains. But conservatives have also always been aware of the dangers of excessively policing that morality, and of the evils that can occur when the morally certain gain power. Hence the apparent conservative paradox. Conservatives want morality but they don't want the big government that

could effectively enforce it. For true conservatives, the evils of moral chaos are usually outweighed by the evils of a moralizing big brother.

And so conservatives have learned over the years to live with a little paradox. They have resisted the temptation either to become morally indifferent libertarians or to become morally repugnant ideologues. Although they have worried about moral and social trends, they have resisted easy pessimism and the jeremiad. And they have left the impositions of morals to the churches and preachers and mothers and fathers and teachers and friends of America to sort out. When it comes to preaching, true conservatives would much prefer to praise the examples of Mark McGwire and Sammy Sosa than to demonize the likes of Dennis Rodman or Marv Albert.

Above all, true conservatives have not been depressed by freedom. This, after all, is where the modern conservative movement in America started in the 1950's - in a revolt against the creeping power of the postwar welfare state. When American conservatives lose sight of that central strain in their philosophy, when their love of freedom becomes an afterthought to their concern for morality, then they lose sight of what makes them both conservative and quintessentially American. They lose sight of what distinguishes them from the darker history of European conservatism...

Truly American conservatives would not recoil at the greater liberty enjoyed by women, racial minorities and homosexuals, as the truly American conservative Barry Goldwater showed. In the last decade, true American conservatives would have been heartened by the declines in divorce, crime and teen-age births, and encouraged by the move among gay people for more stable, responsible relationships. They would have been elated by the collapse of collectivism and totalitarianism abroad, and encouraged by the return of fiscal prudence and social responsibility at home. They would have seen in Bill Clinton a dangerous proclivity for dishonesty and abuse of power, but they would not have seen him as the degenerate apotheosis of an entire generation - let alone an entire nation. And they would have seen the emergence of religious dogmatists on the far right as a threat to constitutional order and political civility, not as a boon for votes.

Above all, they would not have fatally overplayed their hand and tried to impeach a President not for illegality but for immorality, and they wouldn't have shredded the virtues of privacy and decency and common sense for the emotional release of a cultural jihad. ...

Well, he goes on, and I find what he says to be profoundly true, for what has happened in this nation is that, in the debacle we've experienced before a President that should have resigned a long time ago, I suppose, Andrew Sullivan suggests the same, but nonetheless, we have come to focus on that which is

miniscule, in light of the constitutional tragedy that is being played out in our midst. And the Congress has stooped so low that Larry Flynt can remove the Speaker-elect of the House of Representatives, not because Larry Flynt has become a major player in the American political scene, or somehow or other risen from his normal arena of operation, but because the Congress of the United States has descended into that arena for partisan mean-spiritedness, and that decrying of the social condition of America which is rampant in conservative intellectual journals in our day fails to take seriously the Christmas miracle of incarnation.

In this day, on the threshold of another Christmas, I want to speak of incarnation, here and now. I want to say that what has happened in our nation's capital is a betrayal of that which is highest and best and most noble in the American tradition. I want to say that I refuse to join in the bitterness and the cynicism and decry this present moment. This is human history; human history is messy! Whoever said it was anything else? It is violent, it is destructive, it is death-dealing, it is power hungry, it is all of that, and it is also the arena into which God has emerged.

I want to give you another image, the old Christmas image of love coming down at Christmas is an image of intervention from beyond. That won't work anymore. It is not love came down at Christmas. It is that love *emerged* in the incarnation 2000 years ago in Jesus Christ, the embodiment of God emerged out of the process and has been emerging ever since. It is trying to be born, the spirit of the flesh of Jesus trying to be born in this world of ours. I don't give up on it. I have hope in history, as did the prophets who didn't blind their eyes to anything that was wrong, to the darkness, to the evil, to the destructiveness. But, nevertheless, because they believed that God was in the process, God was in the midst, they believed in God, trusted in God, hoped in God, and therefore, dreamed a future and a vision.

I do not believe that America is going to hell in a hand basket. I know *you*. I know too many people. I believe in the basic decency, honesty, civility of the American public across the board as well as around the globe. I do not believe that this is the worst of times. There have been good times and bad times vying for position throughout the whole spectrum of human history. This is a time at Christmas to remember that, not an intervention from beyond, but an emergency from within has resulted in one like Jesus in whose face one could see the heart of God. The heart of God is like the face of Jesus. Jesus is the human flesh – a concrete sign of God with, Emmanuel – the same kind of human flesh that you and I possess. I believe in you. I know you well. I believe in the future; I believe in history because history has emanated from cosmology that has emanated in the beginning from the God who said, "Let there be ..." I believe in the future; I believe in Christmas; I believe in you.

This is a great day in which to be alive; this is a day to believe. We know all too well all of the dissembling - dishonesty, lack of integrity of a William Jefferson Clinton, and we don't know it because we've seen it in him. We know it because we've seen it in our own hearts. When will we stop this kind of moralism and judgmentalism? Isn't that perhaps why Jesus said, "Judge not, lest ye be judged?" Is it not we need a word of hope, a word of courage? Hope in history, hope in history's God, confidence that we've not come this way through thousands and billions of years to end up in some fiasco of human conjuring. Oh, I think we have the potential to ruin it all, but one of the surest ways to do it is to become meddlesome, mean, small, and forget, by God, it's Christmas! God in human flesh! God in flawed human flesh! God in your face and mine.

God is love, and if one abides in love, one abides in God. God is present where two human beings love each other. Where love is, God is. I've seen God because I've seen you. I've experienced God because I've touched your flesh, and by God, I believe! I believe.