

The Self-Emptying of God: A Crib and a Cross

Text: Philippians 2:8; Luke 2:12

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Transcription of the spoken sermon

The Christmas story is the heart of the Christian story. That is, the Christmas story is connected to the issue of the story, if we remember that that which occurred on Christmas continued to that which occurred on Calvary. It is the emptying of God, the self-emptying of God, which is manifest between a crib and a cross. The Christmas story begins and the cross completes the picture of God as we understand it in our tradition. A crib, not in a royal palace, not a child born to royalty, but a child born to peasants in a stable. And the issue of it was not a throne and glory and pomp and circumstance, but a cross, crucifixion and loss. The Christmas story connected to the story of the cross, the crib and the cross, really is a picture of the self-emptying of God. From that story we learn the nature of God and the being of God, that it is love. That the ultimate mystery is love. That the nature of God is to give God's self away in a reckless outpouring of love.

Paul in his letter to the Philippians, where he is appealing very practically for harmony and unity within a Christian community, holds up the model of Jesus in his humility. Paul in that context pleads with that congregation to have within them the mind that was in Christ Jesus, and then he begins to portray that downward spiral - the one who, in the imagery that he uses, is one who, having been in equality with God, emptied himself, becoming obedient unto death, even death on a cross. So, we have in that hymn that Paul cites the story of the humiliation of the word that was made flesh and dwelt among us. The story, the Christian story, gives us a clue into the nature of the Ultimate Mystery, and that is love. Love is a word that is so easily used and used so broadly, one almost hesitates to say it that simply, that the Christian story, and particularly its initiation in the Christmas story, is a revelation of the ultimacy of love, but that's what I see there, the ultimacy of love.

I have been trying in this Advent season to switch some images in your mind, trying to create a new model or a new paradigm, a new framework within which to understand the happening of the Christian story. The Advent theme of the one who came will come again, I suggested, needs to be adjusted to understand that the one who came comes again and again and again, in the Spirit, Immanuel, God with us, God with us, God become human as the word became flesh. That's the

miracle of Christmas, that's the mystery of it all, that Ultimate Mystery finally manifested itself billions and billions of years in a cosmic unfolding that eventuated in life, in conscious life, aware life, human life, that eventuated in human culture and human history, all of it of a piece, all of it one fabric, all of it one tapestry, all of it continuing to develop, to unfold, all of it continuing to move into a future unknown, uncharted, all of it into which we are laced, a part of one whole, a cosmic, historical reality.

I think John was trying to say that when he began his Gospel with those words, "In the beginning was the word," reminding us that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, that it was the Spirit of God in the beginning that brought the cosmos out of the chaos, the Spirit of God that brought the fruit of Mary's womb to fruition, that it was the Spirit of God that was the continuing presence of Jesus, Immanuel, in human history, and that presence of God in human history is the here and now of incarnation as the Spirit indwells the Church, the people of God, humankind. So, in the Advent season we recognized our responsibility for our world, for history, and that the only hope for the transformation of the social order, the only hope for history was to emulate the word made flesh, to follow in the way of Jesus.

On this Christmas Sunday, let me just say it simply, clearly, that the Christmas story which emerged in the fullness of time with the word becoming flesh is a revelation of the Ultimate Mystery which is love. That Ultimate Mystery that overflows in creative action, that Ultimate Mystery that is the enlivening Spirit of all that is, that Ultimate Mystery that is the ground and origin and source of everything, that Ultimate Mystery is revealed in the word made flesh as love, as a love that gives itself away. As the Ultimate Mystery empties itself in creative action, so the Word made flesh emptied himself in obedience to death, even death on a cross, so that what we have in the manifestation of the mystery in the face of Jesus is a clue to the nature of Ultimate Reality which is love, and love which is so commonly spoken of and bandied about is a very rare reality in the midst of human history and in our lives, because real love, authentic love, the love that we see manifested in Jesus as a reflection of the love that is in that Ultimate Mystery we call God, is a precarious thing, because when you love, you give the issue of your love into the hands of the other. You cannot love and control. It is risky to love, because you empty yourself for the sake of another and put the issue of that action in the hands of the other. When you love, when you create the other and love the other, you no longer can coerce. True love would not manipulate. True love is precarious because it can only wait. Its issue, whether that be triumph or tragedy, rests in the one loved.

Not many of us dare love that way, that total giving of self, that total emptying of self so that the expression of love will be received or not, totally out of the lover's control. Not only is loving precarious, the lover becomes vulnerable because the lover loves so much that love can be killed, damaged, hurt, crushed, and if there is authentic love, there is no recourse.

The poet George McDonald said "They all were looking for a king to slay their foes and lift them high. Thou camst a little baby thing that made a woman cry."

Precisely. The God revealed in Jesus at Christmas and Calvary is not a God we would choose. It is not the God the Church has preached and portrayed. The God of Christmas and Calvary, honestly seen, insightfully understood, is a God Who is self-emptying love, Who loves precariously and loses, Who loves vulnerably and cried out, "My God, my God, why?"

"They all were looking for a king to slay their foes and lift them high." Wouldn't we love it so? God in control. God, the Supreme Power. Don't we love all of those latinized words, omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent? Don't we want God to be everywhere, everywhere present, knowing all things with absolute power? Is not the old scheme in which we have been schooled through the centuries a scheme in which God comes out right, on top, right is right, justice wins, and we are the triumphant ones, ultimately? And it flies in the face of the human experience of our everyday lives. If we think again, is not the message really that of self-emptying love that gives itself away without guarantees, no guarantees, no guarantees with love?

Take Shawn and Molly with their Jonathan and Megan, or Chris and Annie with their Caroline. Love created those beautiful children, and love will nurture them, and then what will the issue be? Pray God it will be the issue that we saw concretely demonstrated in our presence this morning, but is there any guarantee? Has authentic love that creates a child as truly another, any guarantee, or has not authentic love created that which is other which becomes its own center of being? Is it not true for all of us who are parents or grandparents that if we love, truly, we cannot control, we would not coerce, we will not manipulate? All we will do is love and wait, and I suspect that our relationship with our children that we create in an act of love and nurture and send on their way is probably a fair image of that which the Ultimate Mystery engaged in the act of creation, creating that which was other, that which would be waited upon for its response, that which would be loved unconditionally, precariously, vulnerably, knowing that the issue of it lies with the other and the ultimate consequence is not to be seen or predicted ahead of time.

That's a shaky way to live, isn't it? Isn't that to live out of control? Precisely. And the heresy this morning is that creation is out of God's control, except the love of God that will never quit. What comfort is there, what hope is there, then, what security is there? There is none in terms of outcome predicted and guaranteed and certain. There is only this - that in every tragedy it will be encompassed in the love of God Who will not quit, Who is able to turn tragedy into triumph, a triumph which again comes into risk which may end in another tragedy before which God will not quit, but continue to love until that tragedy, too, is transcended in a greater triumph.

The clue to God is the crib and the cross. My God, how could we have gotten it so wrong for so long? How could we have had this Almighty, muscular God on a throne in control? When you look into the face of a child in a crib and the anguish of one nailed to a cross, that's God, that's love. It gets defeated again and again and again, but it never stops loving.

That sounds like a parent. Maybe a parent is the best reflection we have of that eternal mystery whose overflowing in creative love brought us into being and Whose love, through all the meanderings of history and all of our tragic darkness, will never let us go. That's our hope - not that things will be fine, but that God will never stop loving.