



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day Selection II

O Come All Ye Faithful, Bored and Irritated

[RCL]: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7) 8-20

Why are we here today?

That's actually a more complex question than we might think. Many of us are here out of habit and/or tradition. We're here either because we come to this church every Sunday and Christmas Day is part of the deal, or we're here because we simply always go to church on Christmas and Easter.

We might be here because our parents made us come, or we might be here for the sake of the children or grandchildren. We might be here to sing favorite carols and see the greenery and just generally feel festive. Every one of those reasons is a fine and good reason to be in church today.

But there might just be another reason working in the background, whether we realize it or not.

Think about the people who were at the first Christmas. Mary was there because she literally had no other choice. Biology took over at that point and she was obviously present at the birth of her child. Joseph was there because he loved his fiancée and wanted to do right by her and take care of her. The sheep and camels were there because their stable had been invaded by this couple who could find no room at the inn. And the shepherds were there probably out of curiosity, to find out if their vision of the angelic host was real or just a result of being oxygen deprived in the thin air way up on the hillsides with their sheep.

And the fact that they were in Bethlehem was not on purpose either. Mary and Joseph would probably have wanted to have the baby at home in Nazareth where they had friends and family to help them. They were only in Bethlehem because they had to go there for the census ordered by the emperor. Perhaps it was an equally strange mix of seemingly meaningless circumstances that brought you here today.

The old Christmas hymn, *Adeste Fideles*, calls all of us to this moment. "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant." We hope to feel joyful and triumphant on Christmas. Mary likely felt joyful and triumphant after just going through labor with no family or friends to help her and successfully delivering a healthy baby boy.

But it's okay if you're not feeling joyful and triumphant. O come, all ye faithful, bored and irritated. O come, all ye faithful, exhausted and worried. O come, all ye faithful, cynical and angry. O come, all ye faithful, heartbroken and grieving.

Simply come, all ye faithful, no matter what you're feeling.

No doubt Joseph and the shepherds had mixed feelings as they entered the stable. But once they gazed on the face of the Christ Child, the Baby Jesus, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger, everything changed. Whatever reason had brought them to this moment no longer mattered, and all of their complex, self-directed emotions faded to simple awe. When they saw him, their hearts cried out to do only one thing: fall to their knees and adore him.

What does it mean to adore someone?

It's a term that we use lightly all the time to express admiration and love for someone: "Oh, I just adore her, she's wonderful."

The term "adore" is actually used very sparingly in the Bible. There are a variety of words used in relationship to worship: praise, glorify, rejoice. But adoration only happens in circumstances when people feel their smallness and imperfection in the face of the greatness and perfection of God. But rather than the people feeling bad about how small and imperfect they are, they are instead completely taken outside of themselves and enraptured and lost in the love and wonder of God.

Most of us probably do an okay amount of praising God, and we sure do a whole lot of petitioning God, asking God to fulfill our wishes and plans. But how often do we adore God? How often do we let go of our own agendas completely because we can't help it, because we are so overwhelmed by the goodness and love of God streaming over and through us? Maybe not often enough.

There's something in us that resists adoration. With praise and petition and even rejoicing and glorifying, we're still in control. We're generating action toward God based on our evaluation of God's goodness and what we want to get out of it.

But to adore God is something else. Adoration means we are brought to our knees by the grace we're experiencing, and it's no longer about us. For once, we have forgotten our needs and our wants, and simply bask in how very good God is.

But if we find it hard to adore God in God's majesty and greatness, it seems even less likely that we will want to go to our knees in a dusty, dirty stable for a newborn baby in a manger. There's nothing awe-inspiring about a helpless baby. What has a baby done to impress me? What can a baby do to answer my prayers?

But even as we're thinking these thoughts, we suddenly do stumble to our knees. God could have come to earth in any giant, majestic, theatrical way God wanted to. God could have shown up with lights painted across

the sky and trumpets and fireworks and earthquakes. But God came as a child. God sent God's beloved and only son as the most vulnerable and fragile creature imaginable: a human baby.

And that is what strikes us dumb and finally, finally takes our focus off ourselves and our needs. The raw power and depth of love that God must have for us to send Jesus to us this way when something terrible could so easily have happened is humbling. Think about how astronomically high the rate of infant mortality was in those days. Cold, exposure, infection, injury—a thousand things could have gone wrong in the first hours, not to mention the days and weeks and months to come, days and weeks and months in which Jesus had nothing to protect him, no modern medicine, no safe shelter, nothing but love.

The courage of that love, to come to earth as a fragile human baby and risk it all for us in this obscure and humble place—suddenly there is nothing we want to do more than go to our knees at the manger and adore him. The fragile courage of this small child awakens a similar fragile courage within us, to kneel down and open ourselves completely to this love, to let go, to adore.

Jesus had no protection from the many dangers that could harm him as a human baby, and he has no protection from the coldness of our cynicism and indifference. But the love and promise that he radiates emit a light brighter than the star shining overhead, a light that can melt the cold shield of ice we have wrapped around our hearts to protect ourselves from the intensity of pain and joy that comes with loving.

So we the faithful have come as we were called. Joyful and triumphant, bored and irritated, cynical and angry, exhausted and worried, or grieving and heartbroken, we have come.

Maybe we expected to drift off into daydreams during church, or ask God for something special in our stockings, or simply relax and have a good time with friends and family, and all of those things are fine to do. Maybe we came here worrying that we would have to hide the fact that we are afraid that we are the only ones that sometimes can neither see nor feel the magic of Christmas.

But as we approach the manger and see that God has had the courage to risk it all for us, out of the sheer depth and passion of God's love for us, let us answer that courage with a courage of our own. Let us answer with the courage to let go of our agendas and our needs, kneeling at the manger and gazing into the face of love, fragile in form but stronger than steel in intent.

O come, all ye faithful. O come, let us adore him.

The Rev. Whitney Rice is an Episcopal priest, recently named an Evangelism Catalyst for the Diocese of Indianapolis, who currently serves at St. Francis In-The-Fields Episcopal Church in Zionsville, Indiana. She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School where she won the Yale University Charles S. Mersick Prize for Public Address and Preaching and the Yale University E. William Muehl Award for Excellence in Preaching. She has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women's Project journal Fidelia's Sisters, and other publications. She is a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations, and a founding partner in the newly-forming women's spirituality collective The Hive (www.thehiveapiary.com). Find more of her work at her website Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).

Published by the Office of Communication of The Episcopal Church, 815 Second Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

© 2018 The Domestic and Foreign Missionary Society of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. All rights reserved.