



SERMONS
THAT WORK



SERMONS FOR *Advent and Christmas 2022*

An offering of
Sermons That Work

THE *Episcopal* CHURCH 

Advent 2022

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One of the hymns that has particular resonance with our people every year is “Once in royal David’s city” – the briefest retelling of the Christmas story that expands outward, explaining to the hearer the significance of this short tale. Episcopalians may be most familiar with the hymn from listening to or watching King’s College’s service of nine lessons and carols each year, where tradition dictates that a boy chorister lead the choir into the chapel, singing the first verse a cappella. Around the cold stone walls, his lonely voice echoes, “Once in royal David’s city stood a lowly cattle shed, where a mother laid her baby in a manger for his bed: Mary was that mother mild, Jesus Christ her little child.” Then the larger choir sings along, a little louder, a little more jubilant. Then the whole congregation joins in as the organ swells, setting a joyful and expectant mood for the Good News that awaits.

Some years ago, I experienced this with my congregation, and it was truly glorious. But the most stirring part of this service was how it ended. The choir member who opened worship closed it as well, singing the fifth verse alone as the congregation listened: “And our eyes at last shall see him, through his own redeeming love; for that child who seemed so helpless is our Lord in heaven above; and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone.”

What a remarkable way of sharing the Christian life. Jesus comes to us, a crying infant in the night—the One who set the stars in the sky lying under them, the One who made the animals lying among them. The story of this infant king grows and grows, spreading farther and farther, filling the world, which cannot contain him, forming us in his pattern, inspiring us with beauty and truth. And then, after the crash of the cymbals ends and the organ quiets, we hear the still, small voice that calls each of us, one by one, in God’s good time, back to him. Like that lone chorister, he is calling me and calling you and calling the whole world, at the last.

On behalf of Sermons That Work and The Episcopal Church Office of Communication, I wish you a blessed Advent and a merry Christmas.

Your brother in Christ,

Christopher Sikkema
The Episcopal Church

First Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 2:1-5; PSALM 122; ROMANS 13:11-14; MATTHEW 24:36-44

A REAL JOY

by the Rev. Bertie Pearson

Today we enter a transformational, even magical time of year: for this is... the weekend between Black Friday and Cyber Monday, and there are only 26 shopping days left until Christmas! It is time to spread sweetness and light among your loved ones by making all the right purchases. Deck the halls! Contemplate Rudolph! Be overwhelmed by the magic and joy of the season — *at any cost!*

But I'm afraid I have some disappointing news: This year's Christmas party is going to be exactly like the one last year, at the big family dinner, political differences are going to lie tensely below the surface, and the kids will be obsessed with their new toys for a day or two, before they get lost in the back of a closet, never to be seen again. The new bracelet is going to be put in the jewelry box with the others, the new golf clubs are going to work a lot like the old ones did, and December will turn into January. We are promised so much at this time of year, but it's usually a little disappointing.

That being said, it does seem like a profound marketing mistake on the part of the church to refuse to play into all of this. Why doesn't Jingle Bells appear in our Hymnal? Couldn't we get an inflatable Santa for the church lawn? Christmas is really a church thing, so why shouldn't we draw in the holiday crowds by selling a little Christmas magic, too?

Instead, we miss the holiday boat yet again this year, as we begin Advent with this decidedly *unfestive* passage from Romans. This is the season for reveling, for an extra cocktail, for coveting and bragging about our presents, but here comes bah-humbug St. Paul, saying, "Let us live... not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy." *What a grinch!*

And yet, this is not because the Church is so puritanical that it can't sully its hands with the extra eggnog or Cyber Monday deal; it's not because the Church doesn't have a sense of joy that we keep a holy Advent. Instead, we as a Church keep the season of Advent because we are not interested in buying fake joy at 40% off, we *only* care about the real thing.

The world's idea of pleasure is really just getting to a point at which our cravings leave us alone. You can wolf down three helpings of ham and four pieces of pie, but this rarely imparts actual joy — instead, you end up feeling ill — and in the longed-for gift, the joy is, at best, only momentary and fleeting.

St. Paul doesn't tell us that this isn't really the season to be jolly, instead, he tells us to, "Put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires."

For St. Paul, the desires of the flesh are not only sensual desires, but all of the impulsive desires that rule us: the desire for revenge, the desire for wealth, the desire to prove others wrong, the desire to be seen as important by others — make no provision to gratify any of these, says St. Paul, but instead, put on the armor of light, put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

In the desires of the flesh, joy is only a glimpse, a passing moment, if it's experienced at all. The only lasting joy is found in the source of all goodness, all peace, all love — in God. Advent is the season in which we look past Christmas and await the day on which we will meet God face-to-face.

In today's Gospel, we read about the Second Coming of Jesus; the great, awe-inspiring day, when the Son of Man returns. There is a modern "left behind" theology that paints the Second Coming of Christ as the worst thing ever to happen to humanity, but for the Apostles and all of the Mothers and Fathers of the Early Church, the second coming of Christ was seen as the *best thing* ever to happen to the world.

Instead of praying to be raptured away and not have to face Christ's return, the early Church prayed daily "thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven," and one of the oldest Christian prayers that has come down to us is so ancient that it wasn't written in Greek, but in Aramaic, the native

language of the Apostles: this prayer is *Maranatha* — Come, O Lord! It is a prayer literally begging Christ to return ASAP!

The end of time is not the terrible destruction of the world, but its restoration, its healing, its perfection. In this life, we catch only fleeting glimpses of the nature of God: in an embrace, in a joyous conversation, in a beautiful object, in a delicious meal — in these, we have intimations of what pure goodness is, what pure love or beauty is.

But at the end of time, God, who is the actual *source* of all joy, all peace, all light, all love, will permeate every fiber of creation. St. John tells us that on that day there will be no light from the sun nor moon, because they will be as nothing compared to the light radiating from the face of Christ, from the throne of the Father, from the presence of the Holy Spirit. The fire of the glory of God will radiate from all things and fill the New Creation.

In one episode of *The Simpsons*, Homer is sitting on the couch, throwing peanuts into his mouth. On his last throw, he misses, the peanut rolls under the couch, and he gets down on his hands and knees to reach blindly under the sofa. His hand touches something which he grasps and pulls out, and he opens his fist to reveal a hundred-dollar bill. His response is, “A hundred dollars!? But I wanted a peanut!”

Jesus tells us to be ready, to keep watch, so that on the last day, at the return of our Lord, we don’t respond, “A new creation full of pure joy? But I wanted a Rolex! I wanted pie! I wanted pornography! I wanted revenge! I wanted a peanut!” And then turn our backs on the greatest gift ever given: the gift of absolute joy, absolute peace, absolute love, the gift of perfect unity with God.

So how do you go about waking up this Advent? How do you prepare for the end of time? First of all, love God: make your relationship with Him your top priority, putting God above wealth, health, status, safety, and everything else; remember that worshipping God in church, praying, and reading Scripture each day are the most profoundly important things that you can do. And then love your neighbor, love every living icon of God, as you love yourself: overcoming selfishness in giving freely to those in need, overcoming pride through acts of kindness and humility, overcoming sin with love.

Not because God, like Santa, will reward us for being good little boys and girls, but *so that you can detach yourself from these impulses*, so that you can forget the peanut and accept the fullness of God instead. And then, on the final day of the resurrection of the dead, when you awake from death and stand before the great judgment seat of Christ, you won’t be filled with

horror, disappointment, and dread — you won’t be filled with materialist peanut longing — but instead will see in Him the fullness of eternal joy.

Fr. Bertie Pearson serves as Rector of Grace Episcopal Church in Georgetown, Texas, and as Dean of the Austin Area Convocation of Clergy. He also produces the popular podcast *The History of Christianity with Bertie Pearson*. This podcast is an exploration of the ideas and themes which continue to shape the Christian faith, and is available on Spotify, iTunes, and wherever fine podcasts are distributed. Before his current parish, Bertie served both Spanish and English-language churches in Austin and San Francisco, played drums in the band *Poolside*, and toured as a DJ. He now lives a much more sedate life with his wife, Dr. Rahel Pearson, their two children, a small room full of dusty records, and a very goodhearted Australian Shepard named *Ida*.

1) Is there a time in your life when, like Homer Simpson, you sought a thing of lesser value than a real treasure? What was it?

“At the end of time,
God, who is the actual
source of all joy, all
peace, all light, all love,
will permeate every
fiber of creation.”

– The Rev. Bertie Pearson

2) Pray the Maranatha prayer for 10 minutes today. You can break the syllables apart in the Aramaic by saying, “Ma-ra-na-tha” or say in English, “Come, Lord Jesus.”

Second Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 11:1-10; PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19; ROMANS 15:4-13;
MATTHEW 3:1-12

RELATIONSHIP

by Jane Wolfe, 1995

The lessons for this second Sunday in Advent are absolutely magnificent in their belief in, understanding of and knowledge about life in the kingdom of God. What do we have here, from the Psalms, through Isaiah, Romans and Matthew? What will it be like?

There will be an abundance of food and understanding and wisdom. The poor and the needy will be rescued and cared for, the oppressed will be made safe and healed, justice and mercy will reign, righteousness and equity will be the order of the day. The Gentiles will be converted. There will be the release of a tremendous power that can actually transform nature. And this power will bring peace, a harmony and order of things that will last forever and will transform our lives forever. It will glorify us in our new existence and burn away the chaff of our former lives. It is the life in the presence of God, the life in God's kingdom, the life in Christ.

What is it like to live in God's kingdom? Why do we take such little advantage of the life God has given us to live? These are questions that rise to the surface as we read the scriptures for today and their stunning declaration of life as it should be. If we believe that Jesus brought this powerful, abundant, and peaceful life to us through his life, death, resurrection, ascension and gift of the Spirit, then it is we who are remiss for not living it. Yet we tend to put the blame off on God; for some reason, we say, the time for the kingdom of God on earth has yet to arrive. It rarely occurs to us that we, not God, might have got it wrong.

In part we've got it wrong because we have misunderstood Christianity. We have failed to understand that we belong to a religion of relationship, not a religion of law. In a law religion, it is our job to follow the rules, and, if a Messiah is part of the package, it is also our job to wait for that Messiah to come, following the rules in the meantime. In a religion of relationship, in Christianity, our job is to acknowledge our relationship with God and to engage in that relationship as living beings, just as God is a living being. That is our essential commitment as Christians: by becoming Christian, we commit to a relationship with God, with Jesus — not to a rule of law, but to life with another human being who is also God.

Living well with Jesus, thus living well in the kingdom of God, requires what all relationships that flourish require: presence — listening, responding, listening again, responding and so on. It is hard to have a healthy relationship with someone if you never show up or only rarely acknowledge their existence. The relationship does exist no matter what you do, but it is simply an unhealthy or inactive relationship if you fail to participate as active partner. Those of us who have unhealthy and inactive relationships with Jesus have them more out of ignorance than out of ill will; but ignorance is easy enough to overcome, and a new church year is a good time to work on that overcoming.

Let's go back to the promises in the lessons. From them we can learn not only about how life should be in the kingdom, but we can learn how we should be, as we are full members with Jesus in that kingdom. Thus we learn from Isaiah that it is not only Jesus on whom the Spirit of the Lord is to rest, but it is on us also as brothers and sisters of the living God. And on us, as well, come to rest the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and the spirit of counsel and might, and the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord. Like Jesus, our delight is to be in the fear of the Lord, and we are not to judge by what we see nor decide by what we hear. Rather, we are to judge with righteousness and decide with equity — those blind and binding garments of the heart.

What a wonderful new year to wake up to, what a glorious kingdom in which to live! Paul's prayer for our new year and for every new day is that the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing — believing that we have a relationship with God that can transform our lives, and by transforming our lives, transform the lives of others.

We are to believe not only in God's promises for us, but in God's ability to implement those promises. It is here that we let our relationship fall into disuse — in the implementation arena of our lives. And it is essential that we allow God the ability to implement God's promises if we are to live into the

full power and joy and contentment of relationship with God. If we believe that God can see that we live in harmony with one another, then we must allow God to implement that harmony; if we believe that God can heal us, we must allow God to implement that healing; if we believe that God can forgive the sins we have committed, then we must allow God to forgive those sins; if we believe that God can baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, then we need to allow God to baptize us with the Holy Spirit and with fire. Thy kingdom come, we pray; but too often we are deaf to God's response: my kingdom is come, rejoice, enjoy, and be glad.

What better new year's resolution to make than to allow God to implement the promises made to us in the scriptures for this Sunday? Bringing this down to the personal, what better new year's resolution for me than for me to allow God to implement in me these promises. To implement them in me, I do have to show up for the relationship, for the work God needs to have happen in me in order for the promises to be implemented in me and in my life. If I am poor and in distress in myself, then I need to show up for God to deliver me from that poverty and distress. If I am oppressed in any way or victimized by violence, then I need to show up for God to redeem me from those circumstances. If God wants to fill me with an abundance of grain from the earth, then I need to show up to be nurtured and fed. If God wants the lamb and the wolf in me lie down together, then I need to show up for God to make that happen. If I want the child in me to be safe in the midst of poison and paralyzing situations within and without, then I must show up for God to implement God's promise to do so. If God wants me to abound in hope, then I must show up for God to implement that hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Easy? Yes. Fearful? Occasionally, but that's okay. We fear because we have not developed that long-term dialog and relationship with God that allows us to fear less and less and trust more and more. There is part of us that thinks if we show up for relationship with God that nothing is going to happen; and a part that says, "Better to not show up than to have that disaster happen." There's another part of us that thinks that if we show up, we will be struck dead for all the wretchedness we feel or have committed; and yet another part of us that says it's better not to show up than be struck dead. It is here that we need to go with Isaiah again and let the little child lead us. Little children are not afraid of God. Let the little child in you show up for relationship with God and let God take it from there. If the little child is too scared anyway, let the infant show up and be held in God's arms. God is pastoral; God loves this relationship and has every desire for it to be glorious. John the Baptist called sinners to repent, and they were glad to do so. If repenting means turning so our face faces Christ, then we are glad to do so also.

You will grow slowly and transform slowly, or so it will seem. But it will also seem like an instant. Some of it will seem painful as the chaff burns up, the branches get pruned and the wheat gets cut and gathered into the granary. You will meet those who are happy at your new life and those who resent it or think it's wrong. Live it anyway; the trip to the beach is worth the sand in your shoes, and the water of redemption will wash away tears and bring joy to the heart of humankind.

Happy New Year. Amen.

This sermon was written by **Jane Wolfe** for Advent 2 (A) in 1995.

1) What, if anything, scares you about a closer relationship with God? What is to be gained?

“We are to believe not only in God’s promises for us, but in God’s ability to implement those promises.”

– Jane Wolfe, 1995

2) This week, commit to saying the Lord’s Prayer at least daily. Pause on the phrase, “thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” and consider what that entails.

Third Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 35:1-10; PSALM 146:4-9 OR CANTICLE 15 OR CANTICLE 3;
JAMES 5:7-10; MATTHEW 11:2-11

EXPECTATIONS

by the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Malianan

The Third Sunday of Advent is traditionally known as “Gaudete” or “Rejoice” Sunday, so called because of the heightened excitement in anticipation for the birth of Christ. But as we listen to the gospel appointed for this day, it may strike us that today is more like a “Blue” Third Sunday of Advent rather than a “Gaudete” Sunday. In the gospel lesson, we find John the Baptist languishing in prison. He heard what the Messiah was doing and he was not happy.

A week ago, the gospel from Matthew 3 told of John the Baptist’s high hopes as he hyped about the Messiah, for whose coming he was to prepare. He explained to the crowd who went to listen to him in the wilderness of Judea: “I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

It is possible that this expectation of the Messiah emboldened John in his preaching. He was notably fearless in confronting the Pharisees and Sadducees, calling them a “brood of vipers,” and calling out Herod for divorcing his wife and marrying his sister-in-law. It was because of this that Herod had him arrested and put behind bars. But perhaps John did not mind going to prison because he was expecting that once Jesus had settled into his role as the Messiah, he would make everything right. He would make quick work of their Roman enemies and rescue him from prison.

But after many months of waiting in prison, it has become evident that Jesus did not live up to all the hype that John heaped upon him. When he heard what Jesus had been doing: healing the sick, casting out demons and teaching people that the meek and the persecuted are blessed, telling them to turn the other cheek and to love not just neighbors but enemies, he sent his disciples to Jesus to ask if he is the one who is to come, or should they look for another. It has become disappointingly clear that John’s expectation of Jesus did not pan out.

Like John, we have expectations of God and have experienced being disappointed by God - some of us more regularly than others. Many of us believe God to be invincible and powerful and expect that God would use his divine powers to heal the sick, solve world hunger, wipe out injustice and racism, stop all wars and reward our faithfulness with material and spiritual blessings. Like John the Baptist, we wish Jesus, our savior, would not act like us finite, ordinary humans, but rather be more like Captain America or Superwoman or any of the many Marvel superheroes and heroes.

But Jesus is not this kind of savior. He did not come with military might or wealth. His way of saving the world is through soft power – sacrificial and loving service. It is no wonder that when one looks at the religious landscape, at conservative, liberal, progressive, religious right, or via media Christians, John’s question seemed to have become the reality as people reject the Jesus of the gospels and look for another version of the Messiah that fits their lifestyle and ideology.

This Advent, as we get ready to welcome Christ anew, we are given another opportunity to get it right. For although Jesus did not give an easy and clear answer to John, he gives him some concrete hints about what he’s up to: “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

These words of Jesus recall the words of the prophet Isaiah in today’s lectionary. These words describe what will happen when the Messiah comes. It was not a popular image associated with most of the Jews’ expectation of the Messiah at that time and yet there it is, hidden in plain sight.

In other words, Jesus tells John that the work of God is not bombastic or earth-shattering as John and many of us imagine it to be. John expected that Jesus would come with an ax to cut down the trees that are not bearing fruit, separate the wheat and store it in the barn and burn the chaff. Instead of this,

Jesus tells him to break free from his narrow expectation that has figuratively imprisoned him, to see beyond the destructive and angry God that he expected the Messiah to be, and open up to the God who heals, who teaches to transform people, who desires not the death of sinners but that all might repent, who shows love, mercy, and compassion. In short, the gospel invites us to open our eyes and our ears to the handprints of God in the hidden, nontraditional, and unpopular, amid our anguish, disappointments, and doubts.

Then, perhaps, when we begin to see God in these “hidden” places, we can be a sign to the world that what Jesus said is true. We can be Jesus’ answer to John’s question. We can be the blind whose eyes were opened, the lame whose legs can walk again, the lepers who have been cleansed, the deaf whose ears have started hearing, the dead who have been raised, and the poor who have received good news.

The gospel does not tell us whether John eventually understood, accepted, and set aside his assumptions of Jesus. What we know is that Jesus welcomed his questions and his doubts and praised John as “more than a prophet” in front of the crowds. This tells us that we should not be ashamed or afraid to voice our questions, name our doubts, and share our stories of disappointments. Often, we do not raise questions because we are embarrassed that people might think of us as ignorant, and we do not share our doubts because we are afraid people will think we are weak. But the way we move past our ignorance is by raising questions; we rewire our brains when we doubt and open ourselves to other possibilities, and we remove the sting of our disappointments by naming them. It is when we share our stories of darkness that we begin our journey toward the light.

The story of John ended tragically when he was beheaded by the order of Herod in Matthew 14. The price of preaching the gospel is that people receive the Good News and are healed and made whole. The other side is that others who enjoy the oppressive status quo will be offended. And so, just like many of the prophets before him, John died, standing up for the truth and serving as light in the darkness. We wish that Jesus would have done more than praise John and would have rescued him from prison. But the gospel is not a fairytale with a happy ending. The gospel is a kaleidoscope of joy, pain, hope, suffering, peace, fear, triumph, surrender, faith, doubt, disappointments, meaning, loss, and fulfillment. Using rhetorical questions, Jesus shakes up the crowd as he tells them to look for God – not among those who are dressed in fine robes or live in royal palaces – but rather among the least and vulnerable, among God’s prophets, like John the Baptist, Mary, Joseph, Elizabeth, and Zechariah. Amen.

This sermon was written by **the Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman**, of the Episcopal Church of St. John the Divine in Tamuning, Guam.

“In short, the gospel invites us to open our eyes and our ears to the handprints of God in the hidden, nontraditional, and unpopular, amid our anguish, disappointments, and doubts.”

– The Ven. Irene Egmalis-Maliaman

1) As the life of John the Baptist amply illustrates, our lives are frequently punctuated by very high points and very low points. How do you maintain hope through disappointment? How can you share that practice or those practices with others?

2) Take a small piece of paper and write, “Rejoice!” on it. Carry it with you – in your pocket or purse or wallet or even shoe! – to remind you of the joy that characterizes this week.

Fourth Sunday of Advent

COLLECT

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

ISAIAH 7:10-16; PSALM 80:1-7, 16-18; ROMANS 1:1-7;
MATTHEW 1:18-25

PARTICIPATING IN GOD'S PLAN

by the Rt. Rev. Frank Logue

God breaks into human history bringing divine plans to fruition through ordinary people. We see this pattern all through scripture, from the patriarch Abraham to the persecutor of Christians, Saul, who becomes the Apostle Paul. And from Deborah and Esther, who bring hope to their people, to Mary Magdalene, who was a witness to the Resurrection sent as the “apostle to the apostles” with the Good News.

This pattern of God working through people is no less true in the most important divine plan in history, as the Word became flesh in Jesus, Emmanuel, God with us. God used Mary and Joseph in a plan to turn the world upside-down, which was really setting everything right once more, in Jesus. Knowing them as St. Mary and St. Joseph can hide the fact that, though this couple was amazing, unique in all history even, they were also very much human.

In our Gospel reading, we see that Joseph is a person with hopes and dreams for his own life, who found himself taking this critical role in history. When we meet Joseph, he is engaged to Mary and learns that she is pregnant. God uses a dream to get Joseph's attention. Joseph hearing from an angel in his sleep is not so different from what you and I can experience. Sure, we can sometimes have dreams that get our attention, but we can also find the Holy Spirit breaking into our imagination. More often, God uses messengers to get our attention, like Mary's relative Elizabeth, who confirmed what Mary had already heard from the angel. God often uses other people to assist us in seeing what God is doing in our lives. A godly friend can be very important as we test out whether our great idea is something the Holy Spirit is prompting us to do.

God does not make anyone act but rather invites us to take part in what God is doing in the world. In Luke's Gospel, we read of how the Angel Gabriel appeared to Mary, with Mary later responding, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

Here in Matthew's Gospel, we find Joseph wanting to do the right thing. Breaking an engagement took a divorce decree, and divorce had to be requested by either party and witnessed by three others to be legal, so it was not as easy a matter as it might be today to end an engagement. Joseph wants to handle this in a way that would not harm Mary. Then an angel comes to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Joseph believes the dream and Matthew tells us, “When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife.” Joseph accepted the invitation to participate in God's plan of salvation, just as Mary had already done.

So, Joseph marries Mary. She has a child whom Joseph names Jesus, which means “God saves.” God will save and God will do it through Jesus, but Mary and Joseph were essential to the plan. Mary had to consent to the pregnancy and Joseph to the marriage.

God rarely acts in history with this sort of intervention. Jesus will anger a hometown crowd with this assertion years later, saying, “The truth is, there were many widows in Israel in the time of Elijah, when the heaven was shut up for three years and six months, and there was a severe famine over all the land; yet Elijah was sent to none of them except to a widow at Zarephath in Sidon. There were also many lepers in Israel in the time of the prophet Elisha, and none of them was cleansed except Naaman the Syrian.”

Through the Incarnation, we see how God acts, even in the extraordinary case of the birth of Jesus. While God becoming human in Jesus is a once-in-all-history event, God does regularly prompt people like you and me to take part in God's hopes and dreams for our world. We are invited to participate in what God is doing through serving others, as though we are serving Jesus.

Jesus describes this in the Parable of the Sheep and the Goats, describing the actions of the faithful: “I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in

prison and you visited me.” Those who cared for others will be surprised, not knowing that they cared for Jesus, who will then explain, “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.”

This parable is all the more poignant when we see Jesus’ humble origins. The King of Creation was not born in a palace to a life of luxury. After Jesus is born, Mary and Joseph will take him to the Temple to offer two turtledoves; the Torah required a lamb together with either a turtledove or a pigeon to be offered for the birth of a son or daughter. However, Leviticus 12:8 noted that poor families could offer two birds instead, as a lamb would present a financial hardship. The Holy Family qualifies for what amounts to a hardship discount. Jesus will later serve others on the road where he is frequently a guest who relies on the hospitality of others, as a stranger welcomed by others. Jesus sees the needs around him everywhere among the members of his human family.

God will find a way to care for those in need, using someone else if we fail to respond. God will work out God’s purposes through whoever is willing to listen to the promptings of their hearts. While you and I will not be invited to such a momentous task as Joseph, we no less can take part in what God is doing. Jesus makes it clear that small acts of providing food for the hungry and drink for the thirsty are of eternal significance. In these small yet meaningful ways, we get to participate in the coming Reign of God by being God’s hands and feet in the world. This is part of how God breaks into human history, bringing divine plans to fruition through ordinary people.

As we journey these last days to our celebration of Jesus’ birth, our eyes should be open anew to how God is giving us the opportunity to respond to a divine invitation. For in caring for those in need, we are serving the Emmanuel, the God who is with us, in Jesus. When we show care for those who would otherwise be lost and left out, we are doing so for the one whose First Advent we celebrate, even as we await Jesus’ coming again in glory.

The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue is the Bishop of Georgia. He previously served on the Executive Council of The Episcopal Church and was the church planter for King of Peace Episcopal Church in Kingsland, Georgia.

“As we journey these last days to our celebration of Jesus’ birth, our eyes should be open anew to how God is giving us the opportunity to respond to a divine invitation”

– The Rt. Rev. Frank Logue

1) Share a story about a time you felt that God was using you and your talents to accomplish something in the world.

2) What are some ministries your congregation undertakes to serve the hungry, thirsty, naked, incarcerated, or strangers in your midst? Can you articulate the connection between your faith and that work?

Christmas Day (I)

COLLECT

O God, you make us glad by the yearly festival of the birth of your only Son Jesus Christ: Grant that we, who joyfully receive him as our Redeemer, may with sure confidence behold him when he comes to be our Judge; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

READINGS

[RCL] ISAIAH 62:6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:(1-7)8-20

WHO COUNTS AT CHRISTMAS?

by the Rev. Canon Whitney Rice

We begin the story of Christmas with a sentence from scripture that's not quite true.

“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.”

Well, almost all the world. Everyone who had some kind of position in society, even a working-class one, like Mary and Joseph, went to be registered. Anyone who could conceivably pay taxes was on the emperor's list and had to report in and be accounted for. It was sort of the first-century equivalent of Big Brother/Big Data. You're not getting anywhere in America without a driver's license, and you couldn't get anywhere in first-century Palestine without being on the emperor's list. If you were taxable, you would be counted.

“All went to their own towns to be registered,” Luke says. Well, again, not quite all.

Luke himself tells us that in the next paragraph: “In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.” The shepherds did not return to their hometowns to be registered. They were on the very bottom rung of society. They couldn't pay taxes and had fallen so far between the cracks of the Roman Empire that they weren't even expected to. They were nobodies. When it came time for the registration, to show up and present their names and papers to the government, no one looked for them. They quite literally didn't count.

And who among all the people in the Bible were the first to hear the news of the birth of Christ? While everyone else was in the city, busily submitting to TSA screenings and handing in forms in triplicate at the DMV and making sure their health insurance card was in their wallet, the shepherds were out in the country with their sheep. They were not worried about whether there would be room at the inn. The inn was never an option for them.

And out of the perilous freedom that was their world, free from what Michael S. Bennett calls “the economic hamster wheel that so engrosses the rest of us,” comes something earth-shattering. “Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them... suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom [God] favors!’”

Why are we always surprised that it is the last and the lost and the least to whom God brings the Good News first? The people who were rejected and scorned and abandoned, people on whom society relied for manual labor and to endure the danger of scaring off predators from the sheep, saw the heavenly host and the glory of the Lord. David was a shepherd who became a king, and so was Jesus. But where David stayed a king, Jesus' identity as the Good Shepherd was always more important to him than any regal crown or royal rule.

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it?” Jesus says later in the Gospel of Luke. Shepherds know what counts, and that is counting every sheep, making sure every single one is safe and home and cared for, no matter how wayward and stubborn.

To the empire, the shepherds didn't count. But to God, they did.

And to Jesus they did, to the point that he took on their name and their ministry, calling himself the Good Shepherd. Why did he do that? Perhaps in gratitude for their next actions in the story: “When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them... The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Imagine what it would feel like to be told by society and the government for your whole life that you don't count. You don't matter. You aren't even worth the trouble to write down your name on a list so you can pay taxes.

And then, imagine being told by the very heavenly host that you do count, in a much bigger world—the Kingdom of God. The shepherds could have stayed in the fields with the sheep—they knew the territory there, they had a job to do there, and they knew they weren't welcome in the city anyway. But they had both the raw courage and the profound generosity to share the message, to share the Good News, with people who had never valued them. That is grace. That is joy. That is a life transformed by the Gospel.

Who do you dislike because you know they don't value you? To whom do you feel like a number and not a name? Are there people in your life who dismiss you because of your age, the home you live in, the country of your birth, the work you do, or the person you love? Who makes you feel like you don't count? That may be the very person whose soul is starving for want of the Good News. That may be the very person who is so trapped by a system that lends them status and importance that they could not imagine what it means to be loved without labels. That may be the person who needs you, a messenger of God, the most.

There are people in your life right now who do not know that God loves them. There are people in your life right now who think they don't count. Someone has to tell them they do matter, that God does love them, and you are that person.

Maybe that's a scary idea or seems like hard work or you'd like to think it's someone else's job. Maybe you're the one who feels like you don't count. Maybe you're the one for whom the love of God is more a nice idea than a visceral experience. Either way, you're a shepherd. You're abiding in the fields, and the heavenly host has something to say to you: "Do not be afraid; for see— I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord."

Hear the message of Christmas and write it on your heart: you count. You matter. You are important. God is so in love with you that God sent God's only Son to live and dwell among you, to teach you and heal you, to die for you and rise for you. And the deeper you take that knowledge into you, the freer and braver you are to tell that to every single person you meet.

"In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Except for the shepherds. Because they had nothing that the empire could use. They were of no value to Rome the political oppressor or Rome the economic juggernaut. They didn't count.

Find the ways you don't count to political oppressors and economic juggernauts. Find the ways you can't fit in as a cog in the machine, because your light is too bright and your shape is too strange and your life is too real. That is where God loves you the most.

You count. You matter. God proclaims that today to the whole universe in the birth of the Christ Child. Don't ever forget it. The Kingdom of God needs you.

The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice (she/her/hers) is an Episcopal priest who serves as the Canon for Evangelism & Discipleship Development for the Episcopal Diocese of Missouri. 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 taught undergraduate courses at the University of Indianapolis and has contributed to Lectionary Homiletics, the Young Clergy Women's Project journal *Fidelia's Sisters*, and other publications. She has served as a researcher and community ministry grant consultant for the Indianapolis Center for Congregations and is currently a member of The Episcopal Church's Evangelism Council of Advice. A communicator of the gospel at heart, she writes and teaches on a wide variety of topics, including rethinking evangelism, stewardship, leadership, women's theology of the body, mysticism, and spiritual development. When she's not thinking about theology, particularly the intersection of evangelism and justice work (which is all the time, seriously), you'll find her swing dancing. Find more of her work at her website *Roof Crashers & Hem Grabbers* (www.roofcrashersandhemgrabbers.com).

1) You do count. You do matter. You are important. How will you remember this in the year ahead?

“God is so in love with you that God sent God’s only Son to live and dwell among you, to teach you and heal you, to die for you and rise for you.”

– The Rev. Canon Whitney Rice

2) Canon Rice challenges us to both internalize the fact that we matter to God and to share with others that they matter to God as well. What is one real, concrete action you can take this week to tell someone that they matter to God?

Sermons for Advent and Christmas 2022:
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For more information, please contact:

Christopher Sikkema
Project Manager
The Episcopal Church Office of Communication
csikkema@episcopalchurch.org

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