

St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church sermon for the Nativity of our Lord 2020: "Messy Christmas!"

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Let me begin by wishing a very messy Christmas to one and all!

No, I didn't say that wrong. Messy Christmas is exactly what I meant. I know that the standard greeting is Merry Christmas, but I believe that if we want to celebrate this holy occasion in a way that aligns with its origin story, Messy Christmas would be a far more fitting and useful greeting.

Now why am I messing with our beloved Merry Christmas? Bear with me-I have good reason.

As many of you know, just over a week ago my wife gave birth to a wonderful baby boy, and I could not be more happy and grateful. And anyone listening who has ever given birth or been a partner and close witness to a birth will probably resonate with what I'm about to say. Birth is a wild, uncontrollable, and extremely messy event. It defies any and all attempts at planning and control, and it takes its own course, requiring the complete surrender of mother, baby, and everyone else involved.

I believe it's no accident that the first of the historical events that make up the incredible story of salvation we find in Jesus Christ is the event of birth.

A clergy colleague of mine once said that God could hardly have picked a more messy and inefficient way of saving the human race than the Incarnation. And he is right. The birth of Christ,

sublimely beautiful and powerful as it was, was like any birth-it was a wild, unpredictable, and messy event.

God's Messiah could easily have been some grand angel in flowing robes riding into Judea on a magnificent war horse, and I'm sure that such an entrance would have gotten far more attention and respect than Jesus' birth did.

But that isn't what happened. Instead we got an impromptu birth to migrant parents in an out-of-the-way stable. We got a Messy Christmas.

But maybe this is the entire point. Maybe salvation isn't supposed to be grand, loud, or even immediately recognizable. Maybe it's supposed to be messy and inefficient, a halting and awkward process that demands both our complete attention and complete surrender.

And speaking of messy and inefficient, that brings me to our current situation. Oh boy is it messy. And it's messy in ways beyond the obvious. I have noticed in recent weeks a growing rift in our church community, and it mirrors a much larger rift in our society.

We all agree that the current situation is dire and we are deeply dedicated to seeing it improve. This we all have in common. But as we move outward from this central point, we begin to diverge. On the one hand we have individuals who believe that the best and wisest course of action is to meticulously adhere to the recommendations we have received regarding face masks, sanitation, distancing ourselves from others, and so on, and perhaps observing these guidelines even more strictly than the

mandates suggest. On the other hand, we have individuals who believe that in at least some of these actions we are inadvertently doing ourselves and others more harm than good.

I am 100% confident that both sides of this debate reached their conclusions prayerfully, with reason and compassion. Nonetheless, it leaves us in a very messy situation where each side looks at the other and says, “You are being reckless and dangerous, perhaps even at the cost of my life or the life of someone I love.”

It is precisely into such a mess that the Christmas miracle invites us. We are invited to contemplate God becoming incarnate in a fragile, vulnerable human body, right in the middle of fear, confusion, and chaos such as what faces us right now. And we are invited to hold and love one another in light of that miracle, whether or not we’re successful at resolving the tensions that divide us.

Now I can hear the objection right now. “That’s all fine and good in normal times, preacher, but this Covid situation is a matter of life and death!”

Yes, you’re right, it is a matter of life and death. But that makes the Christmas miracle and what it calls out of us more poignant, not less.

Birth itself puts us in that liminal space between life and death. And even after Jesus’ successful birth, I think I’m on solid ground

in saying that everyday life in Roman-occupied Judea made even the year 2020 look pretty tame by comparison.

So what I'm saying boils down to this. Christmas doesn't give us what we want, or what we think we want. It doesn't bring peace in the sense of ending all the dangers we face and resolving all of the tensions that divide us. In fact, it calls us to a very difficult thing. It calls us to remember that what inaugurated God's master plan of salvation was an event in which He showed up humble and powerless, right in the midst of all of those dangers and tensions. And in doing so, he asked and still asks us to unite at the heart and love one another without our outward circumstances changing one bit for the better.

But the most important thing to carry out of Christmas is this. Neither the first Christmas nor any of the ones that have followed fix everything outwardly. That is not because God is cruel and indifferent or that God's plan is too small to fix it, but rather because the plan is too big, and God's dream for us and all of creation is infinitely grander than shielding us from dangers and resolving our quarrels.

A single sentence says what Christmas is really all about: "God became human so that human might become divine." God shares in our created life to throw the door wide open for us to share in God's Creator life.

For this to happen, we have a tremendous amount of growing to do. In the words of St. Paul, we must shed the corruptible and put

on the incorruptible, must shed the mortal and put on the immortal. We cannot do this if God simply steps in and solves all of our problems for us.

So instead God shows up as one of us. God is born, with all of the wildness and messiness that entails, and lives as a mortal creature. And God bids us to become like that mortal creature. Tempted to judge. Tempted to accuse. Tempted to despair. Tempted to anger. And yet so centered in the divine nature that he did not succumb to these temptations. His knowledge of God as his father and all creatures, even the ones who nailed him to a Cross, as his sisters and brothers, did not waver. And as a reward God gave him the Name that is above every name.

This is God's plan of salvation, for us to become like that. And it begins with our contemplation of the Christmas miracle. So can we contemplate it at the end of this uniquely messy and divisive year, and can we accept its invitation to become more like the Christ child whose birth we celebrate. Can we remember with certainty that God is our divine Father and Mother and that every creature, even, perhaps especially the ones we find most threatening, is our sister and brother? Can we hold this great truth in our hearts when faced with members of our own community who challenge us on points of life and death? I pray we can, because that is what the Christmas miracle is all about. Messy Christmas, my friends!