

Sermon for the First Sunday After Christmas

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Merry Christmas, folks! Today is the Third Day of Christmas, which means your true love should be, any minute now, delivering three french hens, two turtle doves, and a partridge-laden pear tree. We're also in the first few days right after Christmas where the church remembers a slew of important figures. There's St. Stephen the Never-Celebrated on the 26th, St. John on the 27th, and the tragic Holy Innocents on the 28th ...normally. But this year is a little different, because of course it is. Alright, folks, hold onto your santa hats, we're going into the liturgical rough for a second here. There are very few high holy days in the church calendar that we celebrate on a Sunday. The high falutin' way of saying that is "that take precedence over a Sunday." Much as we love John or Stephen or the Holy Innocents, none of them are more important than Sunday, the Lord's Day, the day to set everything else aside and remember that Christ has died, Christ has risen, and Christ will come again. So all those important figures we celebrate on certain days get bumped along in the calendar, and Sunday gets to be just that. Sunday. So, every year, no matter who's on the calendar, we get the same readings, the same slice of the story, on the First Sunday After Christmas.

Now, I have to admit to something here. Once in a blue moon, when inspiration is hard to find, or when the ol' homiletical gas tank is empty, once in a while, I'll look back at my old sermons and crib one from my previous self and hope no one notices. Yes, I was prepared to do that this week. In fact, I was gonna do that this week. I had my fingers ready for the good, ol' cut-and-paste, but I paused to read, and my heart sank. I read the story I preached this Sunday last year, at the tail end of 2019. Maybe some of y'all remember it? My sister, who had been going through a lot, was trying to distract herself from all the sadnesses in her life and began to go to services put on by her church in a women's prison. She'd gone with them off and on for a couple of years, but really stepped it up in earnest as Christmas drew closer. Everytime she went, they'd do Eucharist together, the volunteers and the prisoners. Do y'all remember this? They'd go, and they'd do Eucharist mostly the same as how we used to, except for one important omission: there was no touching allowed. No passing of the peace. No contact with the bread and the wine. Present with each other but no reminder of the touch of incarnation. But in the lead-up to their Christmas Eve service, the priest convinced the Warden to let up for just one part, the Passing of the Peace, but she didn't tell anyone. And when the time came for the inmates and volunteers to acknowledge one another, the priest invited them to pass the Peace with a hug. They all froze, an inmate asked if this was for real, the guard gave the go ahead, and the room erupted in tears as the entire body experienced mercy and love and touch for the first time in interminable ages. I cried the first time I heard that story. I nearly cried when I preached it last year. I felt another familiar tear blossom in the corner of my eye when I re-read it last week! But here's the wild thing: I preached that sermon right after we celebrated the life and vitality of Christ in his Church last year. That was months before Wuhan was a household name, months before we stopped going out in public, months before cherished contact with anyone outside our households became a memory. Months before any of that, my sister told me a story about how important touch can be. And I told that story to you. And not one of us would know how real that story would become for us all.

We have lost so much this year. So many people, God rest their weary souls, so many celebrations, so many habits and promises and memories that could've been made. I've heard more despair, felt more despair than I'd ever known before. You've all been so patient and so faithful and such a witness to endurance. And the loss and the pain and the drudgery stretches on. At the beginning of all this, our Bible Study spent a few Thursdays with the Book of Lamentations, and we found our own fears and worries and losses in those ancient pages. Despair right there in our sacred text, lived and unresolved and somehow faithful in its misery. I said last year that while I've been inside prisons, I've never been a prisoner. I've never known that life, thank God. But this year part of my sister's story has become all too real for all of us. Most of us may not know the fullness of

what life in prison is, but we've certainly learned some of the pain of not being able to hug a loved one or shake an old friend's hand. We're learning how maddening it is being stuck inside the same four walls day after day. We know more of that life now than a life a year ago could've imagined.

Way back in seminary, a professor told us that when we prepare to write sermons, when we pray before opening up the word processor, we ask what the Holy Spirit wants the People of God to hear that day. I knew that story would be a good one. I knew y'all needed to hear it, in large part because I needed to hear it. But I had no idea just how much the Holy Spirit was blowing that day. There was a lesson in that, perhaps a warning looking ahead to love and touch and hold who we could while we could before Covid came. But without a week like this last one, with an empty tank and a full calendar, I wouldn't have caught that lesson. It would've stayed in the archives as an alright sermon once preached. But my sister's story has taken on a new life, one of wisdom learned in retrospect, one of desperate longing named after the fact. I have missed you people in so many ways. But today, a year after talking about prisoners that finally could touch, I especially miss your hugs, your handshakes, your exuberant high fives. I miss your sit-downs in the office, your drive-by updates in the handshake line, your "here, try a bite of this!" at coffee hour. I miss seeing the Incarnation of God every time one of you shares the love of Christ in all the ways you do. The Incarnation is hard to get ahold of if you can't touch it. It's there, always, but God can it be hard to see. Right now, maybe that feels as far off as the manger or a year-old story about a prison in Arkansas, but it's there. And it's real. And it's coming again.

In spite of all we've lost, though, it is Sunday, after all. It's the day we remember Christ died, Christ rose, and Christ will come again. It's a day of hope, no matter what the world holds, or doesn't let us hold. And this year, it's to that place that that tear blooming at the corner of my eye takes me. Last year, we heard a story about touch, sure, but embedded in that, after the year we've been through, there's a story about hope, too. Because those women longed for a time, hoped for a time that touch could return to their lives. They stayed faithful, they lived by the awful rules they had to live by, and one day, in spite of every reason not to imagine it could be possible, God's love erupted into their lives. And if that isn't the life of the church right now, I don't know what is. We are some of the most stubbornly faithful people this world has ever seen. Y'all, Zoom is the pits. No one really likes it, but we get on here and pray for the world anyway. We are living by some really uncomfortable rules, not because we particularly want to, but because we know that part of being incarnate beings means that we can get sick. And by following these awful rules, we honor the sacredness of our neighbors, our vulnerable neighbors, our own flesh and blood. And in spite of every reason to think the world is stuck in the dumpster, we pray for it to change. We pray for love and for peace and for mercy and for justice. We pray that an ancient story will shed some light into what feels like an ever-darkening world. We pray that our God will show us glory in the most mundane corners of our shrunken experiences. We pray that the birth of a child in a redneck town in a long-fallen empire actually matters. We pray that God Incarnate matters, and because of that, our created selves matter a little more, our masked faces honor a little more, our chapped hands love a little more.

One day we'll have our beautiful eruption of a reunion. One day we'll have our hugs and our handshakes and our highfives again. One day we'll celebrate being together in the same room with smiles bared and no one flinching at the sound of the rector clearing his throat. One day we'll see the glory of the Incarnation fully. Who am I kidding, one day? If St. Thomas' is still St. Thomas' -- and it will be -- that party's gonna last a dang month! I so wish that could be today. I so wish we could've had Christmas parties and ugly sweater contests and board game nights. I so wish we could've done a lot of things. But in spite of all the reasons to throw shade at the year that has been, I am grateful. I'm grateful because I've been with an amazing church, a church that knows down in its bones that nothing takes precedence over Sunday, that when it comes time to pray, we have the audacity to take everything that makes our world what it is, we have the audacity to bring that

with us and name it before God. What we live, what we fear, what we love, what we touch, we bring it all here, before God, before God Incarnate, and we pray. Same as any year, we pray. Merry Christmas.