“A Puppy for Christmas!”

A sermon for Christmas Eve, 2018

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Exactly 3 years ago, I was in the final two weeks of preparation for my Ordination Exams, similar to board exams. They were three 7 hour days of holing up in a cubicle within the library to write a series of essays, the topics of which I wouldn’t be given until the beginning of each 3 ½ hour testing period. Like for every exam I have ever taken, I was incredibly anxious. One of the things someone at seminary urged me to do to assuage my fear was to draw a picture of God cradling me as I took the exams. By that third year in seminary, I had learned, that no matter how cheesy-seeming, I should just go with the flow…it would be easier that way. So, I took the colored pencils offered, and drew God as an amorphous blob of the warmest orange shade I could find, with a massive, cushy lap in which I sat, my laptop, and of course, my beloved Coke Zero, in front of me. It was, indeed, an incredibly corny exercise, and yet I taped that picture to my cubicle wall on the first day of the test. Wouldn’t you know, that every time I started to doubt myself, my eyes would drift to the picture in front of me, of me cradled in God’s lap, and it would nurture me back to confidence. It is an image, actually a physical sensation, I now call to mind regularly when I am feeling worried or stressed out.

God most certainly does free us to be our fullest selves by nurturing us, comforting us, and even acting on our behalf. But….this is not what we celebrate this night. For on Christmas, God did not come into the world as a wise, empowered elder pulling us up from our places of darkness and fear. On Christmas, God came into the world as an infant—a vulnerable, wailing infant whose survival was completely dependent on the care of those around him. God came to parents of little means and stature…parents who likely knew struggle and strain. And God came not in mature power and authority, but, instead, God came needing everything. And in needing everything, God empowered this new family to hope and to purpose. God empowered this family to participate in the transformation of all Creation.

God comes to *us* this way, too. God comes to us as the tiniest of seeds needing everything. Nurture…stewardship…protection…love. God comes to *this* world and to us in our hopelessness, in our isolation, in our pain, in those places and aspects of ourselves in which we feel trapped, even in our boredom or numbness, and by enabling *us* to care for *him*, God frees us from helplessness into hope and purpose.

Indeed, what God reveals to us in Christmas is that God unleashes our hope and joy by not only caring for *us*, but perhaps even more often in places of darkness, by inviting *us* to care for *God*!

PAUSE

A few years back I participated in a program called Partakers. Partakers is a non-profit that provides teams of mentors to individuals who are attempting to obtain their undergraduate degrees while in prison. Our team was matched with a woman I will call here, Anna, serving time at the women’s prison in Framingham. When we met Anna, she was in her late 20’s, and was approaching the final year of her 8 or so year prison sentence. Her sentence, though certainly justified given the terribly destructive impact of her crime, was a result of an impetuous decision made in the heat of anger and helplessness. She had spent her entire 8 years behind bars trying to forgive herself for that action, and attempting through every means available to her to make certain she would never again be in such a place of vulnerability. She was not only an A student in the College Behind Bars Program, but had trained for her costmetology license, taken courses in auto repair, and completed extensive training in culinary arts.

Despite all of this preparation, Anna found herself unmotivated and despondent as her release drew closer. Her grades had began dropping in her undergraduate studies. In great contrast to just months before, she reported to us that she didn’t care. As we visited and exchanged letters, she began to share what was going on for her. It turned out that Anna was beginning to plan for her release. In doing that, she was learning that her “freedom” was likely not to be the fullness for which she had worked and hoped so hard. With her criminal record, there were very few jobs she could get. And because of her crime, she had become estranged from her family and had no safety net or network of support. The only folks who would likely receive her back were those she had surrounded herself with when she was a despairing teen, and she worried about whether they might draw her back into a life she no longer wanted for herself. She was losing hope in any sort of fulfilling future, and came to dread her release.

It was in this period of darkness—of feeling trapped and helpless—that God came to Anna. And like on that very first Christmas, God came as a vulnerable child in need of care. Anna was asked to become a handler within the National Education for Service Dogs progam—the only educational program in the prison Anna had not yet participated in. For Anna, God came as one vulnerable and completely dependent, but not as a human infant…instead, God came as a playful puppy! Anna, who had felt so powerless and useless, was now in charge of stewarding, nurturing, and teaching this puppy to become a service dog—to hopefully someday become an invaluable resource of guidance, assistance, and love. Although Anna reported that she was so very tired (the puppy actually slept, or didn’t sleep..in her cell), in caring for the puppy, she somehow found herself with energy again for her schoolwork, and a new reserve of grit for conversations with the prison official charged with helping her work out all the details she needed to nail down in order to be released.

In caring for the puppy, Anna discovered that even in the midst of darkness, she had worth..she had a purpose…she had agency. And in that discovery was freedom to hope, and the joy that always accompanies it. Anna graduated with honors from College Behind Bars that spring, before her release. It is Partakers policy that upon graduation communication must cease between the inmate and her team…So, I don’t know what happened to Anna. But where-ever Anna is now, for that period in which she was chosen to care for God, she experienced the liberation of hope and joy promised to all of us in Jesus’ birth—in God, incarnate, physically in our world.

That liberation may have been temporary for Anna, as it is often temporary for each of us…as it was even temporary for Mary, who would eventually follow her son to the cross. And so, what we celebrate on this Christmas Eve is not just that God came to the darkness in need of our care, but that God will come again, and again, and again, to Anna’s darkness, to each of ours, and to every dark place in all the world… liberating us over and over to hope again, to the knowledge of our own worth and purpose again, to joy again

Maybe that tiny, vulnerable seed of God which needs our nurture, our guidance, and our steadfast presence is a person. Or, maybe it’s an idea or a conviction. Maybe it’s a work of art, or a community, vulnerable in its newness yet so very necessary to those who have come to discover it. Maybe it is even a part of our identity, newly forming—a priest for me, an ex-convict and college graduate for Anna, an activist for some of you. But God does come into every place where we feel stuck or helpless, and God gives us a tiny, vulnerable part of himself to nurture and steward into incredible potential and possibility.

So, where does God need to come to you this Christmas? And how, in that very place, will you look and listen for the tiny, vulnerable part of himself that God has placed in your care?

“For behold! I bring you Good News of Great Joy for all people! For unto you is born this day in the city of David a saviour, which is Christ the Lord! And this will be the sign for you: you will find a child...”

Indeed, this very night, unto us a child *is* born…Come let us adore him! Allelulia!

AMEN.