

Worship the Christ Child: The Radical Defiance of White Supremacy
A Sermon for St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church, Minneapolis
by The Rev. Craig Lemming, *Transitional Deacon*
Sunday, December 25, 2016

Propers for Christmas Day

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 52:7-10

Psalm: Psalm 98

Epistle: Hebrews 1:1-12

Gospel: John 1:1-14

In the name of the Word made flesh Who dwells among us. Amen.

Merry Christmas! It is my honor to preach my first Christmas Day Homily here at St. John the Baptist Episcopal Church. Thank you, Susan+, for this gift.

I don't know about you, but for me, this year has been difficult and I have struggled to surrender to the Christmas Spirit. A struggle made all the more onerous when I learned last week that in the year 1776, the Scottish moral philosopher Adam Smith, author of *The Wealth of Nations*, wrote these sobering words: **"All for ourselves, and nothing for other people, seems, in every age of the world, to have been the vile maxim of the masters of mankind."**¹ Almost everything I read or hear confirms that the masters of humankind do indeed subscribe to this "vile maxim" of greed and ruthless selfishness: "All for ourselves, and nothing for other people." This vile maxim penned in 1776 is still the vile

maxim that defines the moral bankruptcy of many of those in elected seats of power today. With this realization, I plummeted into an unshakable gloom.

And then, yesterday morning, in the pit of my despair, at nine o'clock, I turned on the live broadcast of *A Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols* from King's College Chapel in Cambridge, and yet again, I was powerless to those words of Irish Poet and Hymn-Writer, Cecil Frances Alexander. She wrote:

**... With the poor, the scorned, the lowly,
Lived on earth our Savior holy...**

**... He was little, weak, and helpless,
Tears and smiles, like us he knew
And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.²**

As the language of each of the Nine Lessons and Carols seeped into my heart and mind, a transformation took place. The sound of the voices of King's College Choir performing that divine marriage of poetry and music reminded me of John Milton's gorgeous use of personification:

**Blest pair of Sirens, pledges of Heaven's joy,
Sphere-born harmonious sisters, Voice and Verse,
Wed your divine sounds, and mix'd power employ
Dead things with inbreathed sense able to pierce...³**

Indeed, my soul was pierced by that powerful "inbreathed sense" of song. By the Ninth Lesson, which we just heard as this morning's Gospel, I finally broke down

in tears of joy because my identity was re-affirmed. John, the beloved disciple, gets right into the marrow of our faith and unfolds the mystery and essence of the Incarnation with the poetic economy of fourteen verses of what is arguably the most sublime and divine language ever written. Towards the end of the broadcast, as I listened to and received the Dean's blessing which speaks of Christ's incarnation gathering into one things earthly and heavenly, of inward peace and goodwill, of being made into partakers of God's divine nature,⁴ all my broken fragments were gathered up into wholeness again. In the words of Langston Hughes' *Litany*, which we will hear sung by Russ Stephens at the Offertory this morning, I hear again the call of our vocation:

**Gather up
In the arms of your pity
The sick, the depraved,
The desperate, the tired,
All the scum
Of our weary city
Gather up
In the arms of your love—
Those who expect
No love from above.⁵**

Sadly, as we go forth into the world from this place, live broadcasts from King's College Chapel are not always readily available to draw us out of life's struggles. How will we choose to cope with and to confront that vile maxim: "All for

ourselves, and nothing for other people,” as we enter this challenging New Year ahead? How do we defy the ugliness, greed, and delusions that continue to attain celebrity and to plague our lives?

Thankfully, two weeks ago, St. John’s very own Professor Charles Taliaferro gave a presentation on *The Providence and The Consolations of Philosophy* to the clergy of The Episcopal Church in Minnesota. Thanks to Charles, we were introduced to resources within the Christian tradition to help us in these times of trial. Thank God for Charles, who reminded us of the wisdom of St. Augustine,⁶ the Cambridge Platonists,⁷ Boethius,⁸ and Taliaferro himself,⁹ among others. What I learned was that Christian Scripture, Reason, Tradition, and Experience are radically beautiful, radically good, and radically true. It is imperative, now more than ever, to cultivate beauty, goodness, and truth in every aspect of our lives as a radical act that defies the “vile maxim.” Wrestling intensely, joyfully, and theologically with the tragic beauty of Christ and sharing in Christ’s Holy Eucharist together are our primary tasks in cultivating a defiantly fabulous Christian identity. In the midst of worldly threats that endorse the “vile maxim,” borrowing Paul’s words to the Philippians, it is vital that what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise¹⁰ defines our interiority; not only to survive, but to thrive – to thrive with an interiority “full of grace and

truth.” An interiority ablaze with the fire of Christ’s unconditional love for all people. In closing, hear the words of James Baldwin which resonate with today’s Gospel. Baldwin writes:

One discovers the light in darkness, that is what darkness is for; but everything in our lives depends on how we bear the light. It is necessary, while in darkness, to know that there is a light somewhere, to know that in oneself, waiting to be found, there is a light. What the light reveals is danger, and what it demands is faith... The sea rises, the light fails, lovers cling to each other, and children cling to us. The moment we cease to hold each other, the moment we break faith with one another, the sea engulfs us and the light goes out.¹¹

So, dear friends, on this Christmas morning and as we enter the New Year, remember to hold each other, and never forget that:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. [The Word] was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through [The Word], and without [The Word] not one thing came into being. What has come into being in [The Word] was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... And the Word became flesh and live[s] among us, and we have seen [this] glory, the glory as of [God’s] only son, full of grace and truth.¹²

Amen.

¹ Adam Smith, *The Wealth of Nations*, Penguin English Library (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1982), 35.

² <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/nine-lessons.html>

³ John Milton and John T. Shawcross, *The Complete Poetry of John Milton: Arranged in Chronological Order with an Introduction, Notes, Variants, and Literal Translations of the Foreign Language Forms*, rev. ed. (New York: Anchor Books, 1971), 157.

⁴ <http://www.kings.cam.ac.uk/events/chapel-services/nine-lessons-2016-booklet>

"Christ, who by his incarnation gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, grant you the fullness of inward peace and goodwill, and make you partakers of the divine nature; and the blessing of God Almighty, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, be upon you and remain with you always."

⁵ Langston Hughes, *Selected Poems of Langston Hughes*, vintage classics ed., Vintage Classics (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 24.

⁶ Augustine, *Penguin Classics*, trans. R S. Pine-Coffin, vol. L114, *Confessions* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1961).

⁷ Charles Taliaferro and Alison J. Teply, eds., *Cambridge Platonist Spirituality*, The Classics of Western Spirituality (New York: Paulist Press, 2004).

⁸ Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, rev. ed., trans. V E. Watts Penguin Classics (London: Penguin Books, 1999).

⁹ Charles Taliaferro, *The Golden Cord: A Short Book On the Secular and the Sacred* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Philippians 4:8 (NRSV).

¹¹ James Baldwin, "Nothing Personal," in *Contributions in Black Studies*: Vol. 6, Article 5, 1983. Available at: <http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cibs/vol6/iss1/5>

¹² John 1:1-5, John 1:14 (adapted).