



COME AMONG US

Sermon preached by the Rev. Carol Cole Flanagan on the Third Sunday of Advent, December 16, 2007 at Christ Church, Detroit. RCL Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-10; and Matthew 11:2-11.

O God, take our minds and think through them, take our lips and speak through them, take our hearts and set them on fire.

In 1985 I was a senior at Virginia Seminary. That year the General Convention of the Episcopal Church met in September. Since I was away from school for nearly two weeks, I planned ahead, doing as much of my schoolwork in advance as I could. Now I must say I have never understood the math. We do twice as much work before we go away because we're going to be away. Then we come home and do twice as much to catch up because we've been away. In any case, I returned to my classes up to my ears in work to do. It was my turn to preach for homiletics, and I had a sermon to prepare. I had assignments due. It was the week my sacristy team was on duty in the chapel, and I was stressed. That first morning back I arrived in chapel wound up tighter than a nine-day clock. I opened the Prayer Book to the Collect of the Day, and my eyes fell upon the words, "Grant us, Lord, not to be anxious about earthly things, but to love things heavenly." God surely has a sense of humor! Now, I imagine some of you have had a similar kind of experience, where you have this peculiar feeling God is speaking to **you**.

Since that time, I have taken collects very seriously! This week I turned to the Collect for this Sunday and read:

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...

When we pray, "Stir up your power...and with great might come among us," we acknowledge that God's power is much greater than our own. We acknowledge our dependence and our hunger for God's intervention and aid. However, as mature Christians, we also know that this does not entail magic. We come to our relationship with God with the free will God has given us, the gifts God has given us and the freedom to choose and to act.

That freedom and free will is sometimes a problem. As Paul says in his letter to the Romans, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not *do* what I *want*, but the evil I do *not* want is what I do.” (Romans 7:15)

Today’s collect indicates the problem is that we are “sorely hindered by our sins”. Most of us would not question that I suspect. I am reminded with some frequency of my sins and my limitations. What is also true is that God’s purposes for us and through us are also hindered by those sins.

God could have avoided all the difficulties of human sin and finitude by creating us as automatons without free will, without the freedom to make choices. An automaton would be perfectly compliant. However, I imagine that automatons would be no more satisfying to God than trying to build relationships with dolls or mannequins. However, God took an incredible risk in granting us free will and hoping that we would choose to be in relationship with God and each other. And having taken that risk, God invites our cooperation and collaboration, and makes it possible by extending to us grace and mercy in the gift of Jesus Christ, who by his entrance into human history, by his ministry, and by his death and resurrection bridged the gap between heaven and earth, between God and humanity once and for all.

Now, why did God do this? Why did God go to *so* much trouble? Imagine how you would feel if something you created ran amok? If something wonderful that you made was always getting messed up! If you are at all like me you might be tempted to get out the eraser! And yet, we are told that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son Jesus Christ that all who believe may have everlasting life.

So, in spite of our waywardness, in spite of our limitations and our willfulness, God refuses to get along without us. And why? Because we are good? Probably not! Because we’re so charming? Not likely. Because we are more sophisticated and attractive? Because we are more intelligent than other beings? Not. It would seem that God refuses to do without us because God loves us. Even when we are at our least lovable, God loves us.

Once upon a time...

“A King ran into a dervish, and in keeping with the custom of the East when a King met a subject, he said, “Ask for a favor.”

The dervish replied, “It would be unseemly for me to ask a favor of one of my slaves.”

“How *dare* you speak so disrespectfully to the *King*,” said a guardsman. “Explain yourself or die.”

The dervish said, “I have a slave who is the master of your King.”

“And just who is that?” asked the guardsman.

“Fear,” said the dervish.

As the dervish knew, we do not have to be a slave to fear and anxiety. God has bestowed upon us the gift of freedom and we can choose who our master will be.

In another land, a great and foolish King complained that the rough ground hurt his feet, so he ordered the whole country to be carpeted with cowhide.

The court jester laughed when the King told him of his order.

“What an absolutely crazy idea, Your Majesty,” he cried. “Why all the needless expense? Just cut out two small pads to protect your feet!”

That is what the King did. And that is how the idea of shoes was born.

The enlightened know that to make the world a painless place, you need to change your heart - not the world.

Last is the story of Victor Frankl. Frankl was one of the most prominent psychologists of the past century. A Jew, he was among those imprisoned in the death camps of Nazi Germany, where he experienced atrocities we shudder to even contemplate. His family perished there, and he himself was tortured and subjected to indignities I don't need to describe.

One day, naked and alone in a small room, he gradually became aware of what he would later call “the last of the human freedoms,” - the one freedom his captors could not take from him. They could control his environment, they could do what they wanted to his body, but they could not take from him his freedom to decide how to respond. He and he alone, could determine how events would affect him. Between what happened to him, or the stimulus, and his response to it, was his freedom to choose his response.

While being tortured he would project himself into different circumstances, such as lecturing a classroom of students following his imagined release, or sharing with them the lessons he was learning in the death camps. By exercising this freedom it grew until he had more freedom than did his captors. They had more *liberty*, more *options* to choose from in their environment; but he had more *freedom*, more *internal power* to choose his responses to events. Over time he became an inspiration to all who knew him, even to some of his guards. For decades to come he would help people to find meaning in suffering and dignity in captivity.

Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “No one can hurt you without your consent.”

Gandhi is quoted as having said, “They cannot take away our self-respect if we do not give it to them.”

These are people who discovered that God's gift of freedom allows us to choose how to respond. They learned to change their hearts, not the world. God's gift of free will allows us to choose how events will affect us, and how we will respond – to events in our lives, our church, and our homes; schools and places of work, neighborhoods, and communities. The antidote to anxiety and fear is faith.

Isaiah awakens it today. “Be Strong and fear not! God will come and save you. And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way. And the ransomed of the Lord

shall return. Everlasting joy will be on their heads, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

During this Blessed season of Advent, may God’s bountiful grace and mercy come among us, deliver us from anxiety, fear and sin; and sustain us this day and always. AMEN.

Sources

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