

Born of the Virgin Mary

A sermon for the Third Sunday of Advent

This is Mary Sunday. What do we say about Mary? In the Apostles' Creed we confess "born of the Virgin Mary."

This is part of the larger question: What is Christmas about? We say: "Let's get back to a real Christmas." What has happened is that Christmas has become frantic with shopping. Where is Christmas? Or is it just "Xmas," and the "X" is the whatever, the unknown and you supply whatever is meaningful to you?

How do we put Christ back into Christmas? How do we get back to real Christmas? To talk about this is to raise the question: "Are you going to be a spoil sport? Don't spoil Christmas. This is a magical time of year." The reason that Christmas has become confused is our own fault. We have made it happen this way, and we have to face it.

We feel we have to go along, as the saying goes: If you're going to get along, you have to go along. There are other winter celebrations about the coming of the light, and Christmas is one of those celebrations. In Hinduism there is a major festival called Diwali. In Judaism, it's Hanukkah. The ancient Romans had Saturnalia. The Druids had celebrations of the coming of the light. We still see this in southern England at Stonehenge. On the news we see stories about the coming of the winter solstice. Even though these festivals are far different from each other, we say: "Christmas is about the coming of the light."

We can see the confusion about Christmas in favorite Christmas movies. The number one favorite Christmas movie is "A Christmas Story," about a boy and his hope for a Red Rider Rifle. Then there's "It's a Wonderful Life," a story of someone doing good, and it has nothing to do with Christianity. The third is "A Miracle on Thirty-Fourth Street," which is about Santa. And the fourth is "Charlie Brown's Christmas" about Charlie Brown, and the fifth is "Rudolf the Red-nosed Reindeer" about Rudolf and Santa. There are others, to be sure, but these are often among the top Christmas movies.

Another problem is seeing Jesus as another super-hero. There's Batman, Superman, Santa-man. Jesus-man, and it's all about doing good and fighting evil.

We see the same in Christmas decorations. There are trees, candles, lights. Today we have whole neighborhoods of light displays. It's about winter lights. And the same could be said about the special foods and drinks.

We say to ourselves: "What is the real Christmas? How can we get back to the real Christmas?"

The culture doesn't help. The only real sin anymore is to be intolerant. After all, in 1984 the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that December 25th is a federal holiday, not associated with Christianity, but a holiday just as the first of January is a federal holiday, and Memorial Day and Labor Day are federal holidays. That December 25th has been declared a federal holiday and not about Christianity is a good thing because we are blessed in this country with the experiment of not establishing a religion but separating church and state. Many other countries have an established religion, and this causes real problems. Even though we have problems, the separation of church and state is a blessing.

At the same time: What is Christmas? We know that songs like "Jingle Bells," "I'm dreaming of a white Christmas," "All I want for Christmas is you," and the like have nothing to do with Christianity. That's not what it's about.

We say: "We're not going to cave into the pressure to greet people with 'Happy holidays.'" We'll say: "Merry Christmas!" And then we've done something, taken a stand. We've avoided buying into the idea that it's all about the spirit of Christmas.

That's why Mary is important. Mary is decisive. Not only do we point this out in the Creeds, but it is decisive because God did something, something that is both different and makes all the difference.

When we celebrate at this time that God came and was born as a baby in Bethlehem, it's not just a story or a charade God has created so that we have the idea of being together with hope, peace, unity, and giving.

On the contrary, when God comes, it's not only disruptive, like what happens when a new baby is brought home from the hospital, and everything changes. When God comes, everything changes in two radically new ways.

First of all, there is the **scandal** that the Infinite, the One who made everything, with one word and in one second at one time, the Infinite One became one of us, became a baby boy around two thousand years ago in a country called Palestine. He probably had a hooked nose, brown eyes, and stood about 5' 7" tall. This

explodes all our categories, all our thinking. It's a **scandal**, as Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:22-23: "For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a **scandal** (stumbling block) to Jews and folly to Greeks, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

Some protest: But we have the image of God, a spark of divinity within us. That is not in the Bible. When it talks about the image of God in Genesis 1:27, it goes on to say that the image is a task: "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." The Hebrew mind and the New Testament witness are absolutely against idolatry. There is no way that there is anything in us that could be divine.

At the Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., a council of the whole church defined that Mary is the one who bore God. Not just his humanity but truly God. Not one-third of God because God is one. She is the God-bearer. That's why we affirm what she is. This is only the first half of the story.

The second half, the second **scandal**, is that the One who is holy took on sin and death. This is far beyond anything we can think. God saw that this was the problem. He dealt with it his way, summed up by Paul in 2 Cor 5:21: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." We take his holiness and life; he takes our sin and death. As Luther wrote: The best business deal that ever was, the "happy exchange."

Mel Gibson's movie, "The Passion of the Christ" (2004), focused on the horror and the torture of the crucifixion. But all of that horror is trivial compared to holiness taking on sin and death. Pictures from the Middle Ages of Mary often portray her with the babe sitting in her lap. In his hand he is holding the globe, and on that globe is a cross, pointing to the **scandal** of Christ conquering sin and death.

Therefore we conclude with John 14:27. Jesus says: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, give I unto you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid." (Phil 4:7) Amen