

Sermon, 24 December 2006—Advent IV

Micah 5:2-4; Psalm 80; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-56

This lovely story of two pregnant women who rejoice together at the wondrous thing slowly unfolding in them is a fitting conclusion for Advent. For three Sundays, we have wondered and waited and watched together; we have been warned about false expectations and quick solutions. Now, as Advent itself is coming to term and entering into its painless delivery as Christmas Eve, we hear about our ability to recognize the gift being given. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps when it hears Mary's voice—and Elizabeth intuits that her unborn child is greeting the Holiness Mary carries. That becomes our question today: how do we acknowledge and acclaim the presence of Christ in others? If we are waiting for him, how will we recognize him? So, I will mention three things that cause my heart to pause and to take a second look at the person before me, who comes bearing Christ, as I also must bear and give birth to Christ for others.

The first sign is the simple goodness that makes a life-long habit of seeking out the best in others. This is what Jesus did, chatting with a woman of ill-repute by a Samaritan well, lounging at supper with a tax-collector, entertaining patiently the spiritual ambitions of a rich young man, praising the faith of a Roman centurion, attending to both the scandalous unwelcome guest and the prim tight host at a Pharisee's banquet.

My grandfather taught me this in a single startling moment. When my cousin got married, I was designated my grandfather's chauffeur. I was still in college and confused about life—that lasted longer than college did. My grandfather was feeble by then; he had developed cataracts and severe arthritis, so he needed to move slowly and to be guided. I took him to the wedding, then to the reception. A place at the head table had been reserved

for him, so I seated him there, and then brought him a plate of food. As sometimes happens, the reception was bustling: folks were working the floor and chattering away. I noticed that my grandfather wasn't eating, because nearly everyone was going up to him and talking to him. He was a Virginia gentleman: he knew that you don't eat if the other person doesn't have food also, so he smiled and nodded and never lifted his fork. I was rather irritated by the thoughtlessness of these people who kept getting his attention and keeping nourishment and refreshment from an old man, but I bit my tongue.

After a while, he seemed to be sagging, so I asked him if he wanted to go home, and he allowed that he did. So I took him around to say good-bye, especially to his granddaughter, the bride, and then out to the car. As I was pulling away, I said something along the lines of "I am sorry folks wouldn't let you be so you could eat; that must have worn you out." He answered, "No, they were awfully good to me; they just didn't want me to be lonely."

The second sign that we are in the presence of a Christ-bearer is the suffering that shows us the cost of being in this world. This is what Jesus did, taking on the anxious projections and questions of the self-righteous, the vilification of soldiers who themselves were prisoners of ambitious Empire, the violent abuse of those whose sense of power and even of self depended on an intolerant and rigid religious system, and finally embracing the exhaustion and brokenness that no human flesh can escape, even to the atrocity of death on a cross. God became one of us.

The bishop that ordained me taught me this. A young man on his staff, who happened to be Gay, came down with AIDS in the early days of the epidemic, nearly twenty-five years ago. Bishop Swing, his sense of duty overcoming his distaste, went to see him in the hospital—and there the bishop underwent a conversion. His staff member was in an isolation ward,

which the bishop recognized, not only as medical precaution, but as the fear and hostility of society. The appearance of the young man shocked him: marred beyond recognition, but silent in his suffering. And that recognition caused the ground to shift under the bishop's feet. He had words to describe what he saw before him—"he was despised and rejected; as one from whom others hid their faces, he was despised, and we held him of no account; he was afflicted, and yet he did not open his mouth"—but these were the words of the prophet Isaiah. Suddenly, so the bishop told the story, the face on the pillow became for him the face of Christ. Just so had Jesus endured being cut off from the land of the living. Was the young man without sin? No, of course not; none of us are without sin. But for a moment the young man's torment and the torment of Jesus melted into each other in the bishop's eyes, and he saw the cross before him, and on it God incarnate.

But we must not stop here. Our acknowledgement of the pain of the Incarnation—the pain all of us are destined to endure—is no more than the surface depiction of what the Word accepted in becoming flesh for our sake; we see what we are. But the presence in suffering also summons us. The presence of Christ floats below the surface to the extent that, when we stand in the presence of suffering, we stand before what seeks out the best in us, what quickens our own goodness, what evokes in us our response of compassion and advocacy and action. Then we sense Christ in the desolate person before us as yet unborn charity leaps in the womb of our soul.

The third sign that we are in the presence of a Christ-bearer is the most difficult: it is when we encounter opposition to our self-centered delusions. This is what Jesus did, telling parables that hold before us a mirror that seems to focus on our resentments, rejecting sharply Peter's rejection of the crucifixion, driving the money-changers out of the Temple

with a whip, and rebuking the disciples who were confident that the parents bringing children to be blessed by him were an unwelcome intrusion and that the woman bringing perfume to anoint him was a wasteful idolizer. It is never pleasant to be in the presence of fierce and ruthless clarity.

Buddhists are more adept at this than we Christians are. They know that compassion is pitiless, and that if we are to be freed, then we must not be indulged in our ignorance. Skillful surgery requires a scalpel. Hundreds of stories exist in which the abbots of Zen monasteries pull the veil of delusion aside for those who come to them. Here is one.

A samurai warrior once came to one of these abbots. He was a proud and successful man, a conqueror of territory and a builder of estates. But he had, as many men have, an uneasiness that there was something not in his field of vision, something wider, deeper, higher.... He knew hell and heaven were both options for him in the next life, but how securely to avoid one and to attain the other, that he didn't know. The abbot received him and asked what he wanted. The warrior said he wanted a better understanding of hell and heaven and of how securely to avoid one and to attain the other.

The abbot snorted. "So, you arrogant empty-headed ham-fisted slugging sluggish brawler, do you think you could even understand the words I don't have time to waste uttering?"

The samurai was as shocked as if the abbot had drenched him with a bucket of ice-water. He jumped up in fury, ripping his sword from its scabbard, and stalked, eyes bulging, arteries pounding, towards the abbot, who remained imperturbable as a glacier. Then, just as the samurai raised his sword to strike this officious little prig down, who neither lifted his eyes in alarm nor his hands in self-defense, the abbot said, "That's hell."

The samurai froze. He was far from empty-headed, and he had the skill to see himself, to see the rage masking his pride, the pride masking a sense of inadequacy, the sense of inadequacy masking fear, the fear masking ignorance. So he slowly, shaken, sheathed his sword, and trembling bowed deeply before the abbot.

Looking up at him, the abbot said, “That’s heaven.”

Keep your eye, though, on the samurai, not the clever risky abbot. It is the samurai warrior’s ability both to pause just long enough to see in a fraction of time the deep source of his tsunami of rage on the ocean-bed of his soul and to comprehend that it is the ability to watch and to temper his reactions that will lead him to peace. Just so, the pause at the end of one of Jesus’ parables is the pivot upon which eternal life turns. And there are no wily abbots in our life, pulling our strings for progress—at least not in mine. Instead there are traffic jams, and indecisive customers at check-out, and people who suck their teeth next to you—every one of them Christ, asking in their depths if you can let go of the way you want things to be, and leap to greet him at the moment of self-knowledge.

So today Mary and Elizabeth face each other; we see Elizabeth grasp her belly as she grins, and we hear Mary magnify the Lord as she smiles. That moment can be ours, over and over, day after day, if we learn to be alert to the leaping of our heart in the presence of Christ, when we witness kindness or suffering or insult. And ultimately, that moment of recognition will become for us an eternity of recognition, as we begin to see God at all times and in all places, whom we long to know in our own day and to leap up in acknowledgment of, as we are carried in this womb we call the earth, being brought finally to term for the birth after which we will know nothing but the divine life of the Holy Trinity, whom we praise this day.