

The Reverend John E. McGinn, Rector  
Saint John's Episcopal Church  
Sandwich, Massachusetts 02563

January 2, 2011  
Second Sunday after Christmas

Today's sermon is taken from the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 2.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our Redeemer. Amen*

It's always hard not to feel a little let down the week after Christmas. A few days after Christmas a few years ago, I was noticing that all the Christmas decorations at one of the local CVS stores had been removed. These decorations had already been replaced with Valentine's Day trinkets and cards, red boxes of candy and teddy bears with big hearts on them, and red candles for romantic lighting. The clerk behind the counter was complaining to another of her coworkers. "I hate Valentine's Day," she said. "I never have a boyfriend, and I hate Valentine's Day."

Nothing is as over as Christmas when it's over. The empty boxes, the pretty paper on the floor, the stray tinsel from the tree with which the cat has played and left abandon on the sofa, the empty cartons of eggnog stuffed into the trash bag. Life has come back to normal, whatever that is, and it means that the diversion of the past few weeks, the frenzy and fuss, the lights and glitter, are packed away once again like the star at the top of the tree, taken down and carefully wrapped, padded and protected in its ample box.

And what is left? A war in Iraq and Afghanistan, homeless people sleeping in door stoops, hungry people begging for food, worries about health, kids who concern us, the lack of jobs, and jobs that wear us down. We're back to where we left off before the holidays. Like the folks who were left in town after the Lone Ranger had been for a visit, we may ask out loud, "Who was that masked man?" Or better said, "Who was that babe wrapped in swaddling clothes left lying in a manger?"

Well, we haven't moved that far way from Christmas yet. We're just one week away from celebrating Jesus' birth, and we all know as Episcopalians that Christmas lasts until Epiphany which is January 6, which is Thursday of

this week.

But there is the inevitable letdown. So much was packed into the four weeks of Advent. We can talk about keeping Christmas all year long, but who could handle it? We don't want the clogged streets in Hyannis and around the mall all year. And who can maintain the pace of eating; in fact many of us are already planning our diets to begin tomorrow. I know I am. Actually, we need a little respite from all the busyness. Mary and Joseph weren't allowed to reside permanently in Bethlehem and neither can we. It's back to the real world.

You know what happened to Mary and Joseph and the babe after Jesus' birth. After the wise men were gone and an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, we're told in Matthew's gospel which I just read. "Get up," he said. "Take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." So Joseph got up and took the child and his mother and left for Egypt where he stayed until the death of Herod. The holy family left just in time, but when Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the wise men, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old or younger. Such was the cruelty of the king of Judea. And after Herod died an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, "Get up and take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who are trying to take the child's life are dead." So Joseph got up and took Mary and the child and went to the land of Israel as he was told, but when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, Joseph withdrew to the district of Galilee; there he raised his family in a town called Nazareth.

We complain sometimes because we have to go back to the real world after Christmas, but our world does not compare to the world of this young family that we have been celebrating this past four weeks. They lived in a world where a cruel tyrant could order all infants and toddlers to be put to death. They lived in a world where there were no jets to take them comfortably down to Egypt. The back of a donkey would have to suffice, or perhaps they made journey on foot. Whatever the means of transportation, it was a hard and tiring journey. They lived in a world where even after Herod's death they could not be certain they would be safe. Herod's sons were as cruel as he was.

So Christmas is over. Where does that leave us? Over the weeks of Advent

we celebrated the prophecies of Isaiah. “And when the Messiah comes,” Isaiah said, “the world will have light and love and peace and joy, and the faithful will sing in delight for Emmanuel, God with us, will be born. And he was born, and the world was forever changed.”

But what now? Where is all the light and the love and the peace and the joy when Christmas is over? As I noted in the first Sunday of Advent, the Kingdom of God only established a beachhead at the birth of Jesus. The manger was just the beginning of God’s plan. There is much yet to do. The babe must become a man. Jesus must teach us his ways, and then we must teach the world. Then in the fullness of God’s time, the age of the Messiah will be ushered in, and what are we to do in the meantime? We do what Joseph did during those days following Jesus’ birth. First of all, I think we need to trust God. When Joseph was warned to flee Herod’s wrath, he acted promptly. Joseph trusted God, just as he trusted God when the angel told him that that child in Mary was conceived by the Holy Spirit. This is the kind of man that Joseph was; he was a man of character who trusted God. When God spoke, he obeyed. And Joseph, I think, was a man of faith, and what is faith?

The writer of Hebrews tells us what faith is. He uses Abraham as an example of a man of faith. What was special about Abraham? God came to Abraham and said, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I shall show you.” And a few verses later we learn we read, “So Abraham went as the Lord had told him.” No argument, no delay. God spoke and Abraham obeyed. And later God comes to Abraham and tells him to the region of Moriah and sacrifice his son as a burnt offering at a mountain there; and imagine what a terrible command this was -- sacrifice your son, your only son, whom you love. It is the most horrifying nightmare a parent could have, but then scripture says: “Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey.” No hesitation on Abraham’s part; God speaks and Abraham obeys. That, according to Hebrews, is what faith is. It is not intellectual assent to an abstract idea; it is complete obedience to the will of God.

And the angel comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him not to be afraid of taking Mary as his wife even though she is with child. And then Matthew tells us, “When Joseph woke up he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.” And as we’ve already noted, when an angel came and told him to take Mary and the child to flee into Egypt, Matthew tells us, “So Joseph got up and took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt.”

That was Joseph, a man of integrity, a man of faith. Do you think it might make a difference if all people who call Jesus Lord had that kind of integrity, that kind of complete trust in God's will and God's way? My guess is that it would change the world overnight.

The first thing we need to do after Christmas is to keep trusting God. The second thing we need to do is to take care of those who we love. That was Joseph's primary concern. He loved Mary and loved their son Jesus and was committed to doing whatever was necessary to keep them safe and to provide for them; not only to provide for them materially, but emotionally and spiritually. That is what we do when Christmas has passed. We keep trusting God and we take care of those we love, not only materially, but emotionally and spiritually. We love them, we listen to them, we encourage them. We understand that they are God's gift to us, and we treat them with love and dignity.

That brings me to the last thing I want to say this morning. What do we do when Christmas has passed? We remember the world to which Jesus came and for which he died. Why did Jesus come into the world? One reason and one reason alone: Because God so loved the world. That's it -- Christmas is centered in love. We want to keep the Christmas spirit all year long because the Christmas spirit consists of loving our neighbor and loving God, not just one day of the year, but all the year round.

I want to close with a haunting story -- a difficult story. A man was walking down a dimly lit street late one evening when he heard muffled screams coming from behind a clump of bushes. Alarmed, he slowed down to listen and panicked when he realized that what he was hearing was the unmistakable sounds of a struggle -- heavy grunting, frantic scuffling, tearing of fabric. Only yards from where he stood, a woman was being attacked. He froze in his steps hardly daring to breathe lest the attacker should notice his presence. But then a strange thought occurred to him: Should he get involved? Frightened for his own safety, he cursed himself for having suddenly deciding to take a new route home that night. He had a family responsibilities. What if he became another statistic? He instantly had the urge to run to a safe place and use his cell phone to call police, but he could hear the struggle becoming more desperate. An eternity seemed to pass as he argued with himself, and the deliberations in his head had taken only seconds, but already the girl's cries were growing weaker. He had to decide fast.

How could he sleep at night if he walked away from this horrible thing? So he finally resolved that he could not turn his back on the fate of this unknown woman even if it meant risking his life. Known neither for his bravery nor for his athletic abilities, he nevertheless summoned all the moral courage and physical strength he could muster, and once he had finally determined to help the girl, he became strangely transformed. He ran behind the bushes and pulled the assailant off the woman and wrestled with the attacker for a few minutes until the man fled. Panting hard, he scrambled upright and approached the girl who was crouched behind a tree sobbing. In the darkness he could barely see her outline, but he could certainly sense her trembling shock. Not wanting to frighten her further, he first spoke to her from a distance. "It's okay," he said soothingly. "The man ran away. You're safe now." There was a long pause, and then he heard these words, uttered in wonder and amazement. "Dad, is that you?" Out from behind the trees stepped his youngest daughter. What if he had passed by that night? What if he had decided not to get involved?

What I want to say to you on this Sunday, a week after Christmas, is this: We only have the true spirit of Christmas when we understand that every child on this earth is ultimately our son, our daughter, our brother, our sister. It's good that we take care of those we love; however, it's people of faith, the babe in Bethlehem's manger calls us to expand those borders, to understand that the good of every person on this earth is our concern. So Christmas - the day - is over, but living for Jesus may just be getting started for some of us. Trust God, take care of those you love, expanding the love to all for whom God sent his son to love.

*Amen*

Transcribed by Phyllis K. Briggs