

Sermon for the Last Sunday after Pentecost

Year C, Proper 29
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In 1956 Truman Capote wrote a short memoir from his childhood called *A Christmas Memory*. It looked back to his early childhood, when he was sent to live with relatives after his parents divorced, and he lived with these older aunts, uncles and cousins until he was nine or ten years old.

For the most part these relatives were not that well suited to raise a child. The depression was at its worst, and the house became a home for an extended family, including this child Truman. Of all the adults in the house, Truman felt at ease and at home with an elder cousin he called Sook – a child-like adult who was innocent, free of ambition, and content except when the other adults were angry with her. The two fashioned a bond of loving care for each other until Truman was old enough to be enrolled in a military school. In Capote's words:

Life separates us. Those who Know Best decide that I belong in a military school. And so follows a miserable succession of bugle-blowing prisons, grim reveille-ridden summer camps. I have a new home too. But it doesn't count. Home is where my friend is, and there I never go.

And there she remains, pattering around the kitchen. Alone with Queenie. Then alone. ("Buddy dear," she writes in her wild hard-to-read script, "yesterday Jim Macy's horse kicked Queenie bad. Be thankful she didn't feel much.") . . . But gradually in her letters she tends to confuse me with her other friend, the Buddy who died in the 1880's; more and more, thirteenth days are not the only days she stays in bed: a morning arrives in November, a leafless birdless coming of winter morning, when she cannot rouse herself to exclaim: "Oh my, it's fruitcake weather!"

And when that happens, I know it. A message saying so merely confirms a piece of news some secret vein had already received, severing from me an irreplaceable part of myself, letting it loose like a kite on a broken string. That is why, walking across a school campus on this particular December morning, I keep searching the sky. As if I expected to see, rather like hearts, a lost pair of kites hurrying toward heaven.

At the heart of the Christmas message there is joy. But joy is not a kind of durable happiness or optimism. Joy is not a relentless good mood. Joy only exists if there is also pain, also loss.

Christmas, for many of us, is that time of year when, in the midst of the long nights and cool days of the winter, something of the fullness of life comes into focus. We may become nostalgic, as Capote was, for the better days of bliss that only childhood can offer. We may become devoted to our family and to blessing others, especially the children. We become imaginative enough to consider what peace and harmony and equity might look like. We are knitted together with wider humanity in such a way that generosity comes to the surface.

With each of these reflections, on the bliss of childhood, on the hopes for the future, on the peaceable kingdom — we may often feel the pangs of the places where life is hollow. We note the absence of those who made our childhoods blissful. We note the absence of peace. We feel again the sorrows that accumulate in this life.

And so, the tension of the faithful life comes into better focus. In this year past we have been reflecting on the idea of home and how it might be that we can make Grace Cathedral a home for some, a place of belonging – without exception. In the gospel we hear that the expression of God’s own mind, the essence of God’s imagination and desire – the Word, the logos – took on human flesh and made a home among us, within this realm of earth and cosmos. That Word, whom we know as Jesus of Nazareth, made a home among us.

Even as we declare that as true, though, the tension is reiterated. It is not enough to give thanks for the fact that the Word lives in our midst. John tells us he came to his own, and his own rejected him. He came into the world that existed because of him, and yet the world could not see him or recognize him. BUT, the gospel exclaims, BUT, for all who do receive him, for all who do recognize him, he empowers, gives, transforms those people into children of God, no longer to be at home in the realm of earth and humanity, but now at home and alive as part of that spiritual fellowship described as being at one with the Word, at one with the Father and the Son. No longer limited to the life of the human family, but now transformed to share in the life of the divine family, to share in the essence of God’s own being.

This, though, is where joy comes to life. Helen Luke described joy as having confidence in the happy ending that would become the final reality. C.S. Lewis described joy as having confidence that the luminous, numinous moments of life, in

which the transcendence of God connects with human experience were glimpses into the greater reality toward which we move.

Christmas is imbued with joy because it offers the story of the greater reality, of the unwavering happy end to all things. Christmas is imbued with joy because it reminds us that this child about whom we sing is the expression of God's willingness to be at home among us, to dwell in the midst of the sorrows, gladness, and losses that you and I know so well. Christmas connects with joy because it reminds us that this child has come to invite us into that greater life in which we are one with God and the creative center of all things.

Joy comes into the midst of sorrow and pain, not as a replacement of it. Home is offered in contrast to these earthly homes that can never satisfy, giving us instead that longing that Paul described for the time when we shall be at home in the Lord. Joy comes from a deep seated awareness and trust that the sorrows and injustices of this life eventually give way to the blessing and redemption of the greater life.

Ironically, that greater life is seen in this frail child, born to a family of refugees driven from their homes by an oppressive empire, sheltered in a stable among the beasts of burden. Ironically, poignantly, marvelously, that life is also the life John proclaims in the opening song of his gospel story.

In the beginning was the Word: the Word was with God and the Word was God. Through him all things came into being, not one thing came into being except through him. The Word was in the world that had come into being through him, and the world did not recognize him. He came to his own and his own people did not accept him. But to those who did accept him he gave power to become children of God, who were born not from human stock or human desire or human will but from God himself. The Word became flesh, he lived among us, and we saw his glory, the glory that he has from the Father as only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth.