

December 18, 2022
Fourth Sunday of Advent, Year A
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Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

As you know, Advent is the season of preparation for the coming of Jesus. Today, the fourth and last Sunday of Advent, finally we arrive at a nativity story, this year from Matthew. Finally, the big event is right in front of us, the birth of Jesus in all its messy glory. That messy glory reminds us of an important particular: our Advent *preparation* is for God *coming* to Earth in a *human body*. And so we might ask: What does that say about God? What does that say about us?

My Christian faith is very much tied to an important assertion: every human body carries the spark of the divine. *Every* human body carries the spark of the divine. This is inferred from the very beginning, when God made humans in God's image. It's not at all a radical idea.

Nonetheless, Christianity has pretty much always included the *suspicion of* and *ambivalence about* human embodiment. It's worth nothing that this doesn't seem to be any part of the message of the four canonical gospels. We can hear it from the apostle Paul, whose piety involved an asceticism that he held up as the height of spiritual evolvment. Let me just point out here that Jesus, not Paul, ought to be our highest authority on this. Besides, Paul also wrongly thought that the second coming was imminent. Two thousand years later, Jesus still hasn't come. And we are recipients of a Christian tradition that often seems to understand the body primarily as the *source of temptation* and the *location of sin*.

That too gets referred back to our very beginning. At our annual Service of Lessons & Carols for Advent, the first reading is always the story of The Fall. The liturgy that we use for that service is included in a supplement to our *Book of Common Prayer* called the *Book of Occasional Services*. For the nine lessons, it offers a list of Bible passages from among which the liturgy planner may choose. But it also says this: "The Lesson from the third chapter of Genesis is never omitted."¹ It also always comes first. To be honest, this always annoys me. Ugh, I think, this is a festive service, why do we have to hear that?

That question always pops into my mind, but I know the accepted answer. The lessons of Advent Lessons & Carols recount the history of salvation. To be saved you have to need saving, so that history begins with the Fall. There's a joke that you may have seen in a cartoon or on a sign or as a meme. In it, God is speaking these words: "Don't make me come down there!" Humanity was so sinful that, in the person of Jesus, God had to come down here. Some say that Jesus even had to die for our sins. And it all goes back to Eve.

You know how the story goes. God tells Adam not to eat of the fruit of the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. That crafty serpent tricks Eve into eating it anyway, and she passes it on to Adam. This eating of the forbidden fruit is the so-called original sin of humankind. I think the core important lesson of this story is this: humans have a terrible propensity to sin. We do bad things; we turn our heads when others do bad things. As a result, everyone involved suffers. I don't think any of us can argue with that.

The challenge is the other stuff has been heaped onto this story. For example, Eve takes the fall for the Fall. But for her temptations, Adam would not have gone wrong. Women have been living with the blame and the shame of that ever since. There's that, and there's a whole lot more. In short, I'll direct us back to that general Christian suspicion of and ambivalence about human embodiment.

Christianity's suspicion of and ambivalence about human embodiment isn't even just limited to Christianity anymore. It long ago reached beyond Christianity and deep into secular culture. The effects long have been and will continue to be both individual and societal. There is just so much I could say about all that, probably a year of Sunday sermons. I could talk about the standards of beauty for women that just keep getting less attainable. I could talk about the history of colonization that is a history of colonization not just of land but also of bodies. I could talk about queer bodies, quite personally, as someone who seriously wondered when I came out if God would strike me down, even though I didn't even believe in a God who strikes people down. I could even go so far as to talk about temporality and the abuse of the body of the Earth. I think you get the idea.

The truth is, for us humans, embodiment is a mixed bag. Every body is different, and every body is vulnerable. Eventually, even the most reliable body will eventually fail. This fact simply reinforces all those negative messages. It can be so very hard to fully appreciate the goodness of one's own embodiment. Even more, in this I think it takes one to know one. Therefore we can fully appreciate the goodness of *all* embodiment only by fully appreciating the goodness of our own.

Speaking of bodies, let's talk about baptism. We really shouldn't talk about baptism without talking about bodies. Today we're going to baptize young Cooper Thomas Martinez.

Earlier I mentioned original sin. In the Roman Catholic Church, baptism provides cleansing of original sin, and that's why infants are baptized. In the Episcopal Church, we understand baptism differently. In the Episcopal Church, baptism provides full initiation into the body of Christ, and *that's* why infants are baptized. The short Catechism included in our *Book of Common Prayer* puts it this way:

Q. What is Holy Baptism?

A. Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God.

...

Q. Why then are infants baptized?

A. Infants are baptized so that they can share citizenship in the Covenant, membership in Christ, and redemption by God.²

On Christmas Day, Cooper will turn 20 months old. I'm not sure there is a more fully embodied human than a 20-month-old. The thing is, a 20-month-old cannot sin. A 20-month-old can only experience grace—grace upon grace. I know that every human falters, over and over again. But every one of us used to be a 20-month-old. And maybe every one of us still has an inner 20-month-old living on inside us. I think we can learn something from our inner 20-month-old. It would start with this: it's not about sin; it's all about grace.

I think we tend to get this backwards, thinking that God's grace is necessary because of sin. But, really, God's grace always did and always will come first. We have no other way to be in this created world than in our created bodies. God must have been up to something intrinsically *good* when God evolved them.

I say that, and it seems obvious. But I'm not sure how well we internalize that message. After all, doing so means pushing up against some very large obstacles.

In a few minutes we will baptize Cooper Thomas Martinez. He already carries the spark of the divine, and now we're going to initiate him into the community of Christians. Note that we will baptize his *body*, the body through which he will experience all that this world has to offer. What a profound gift that is.

It's a good reminder for all of us this Advent and on into this Christmas. Your body, the means through which you carry the spark of the divine, is a gift from God. Leave the shame behind, and take all the joy that you can.

Notes

¹ *The 2018 Book of Occasional Services*, 23.

² *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer*, 858.