

**Sermon for Christmas Eve (All Cycles) – December 24, 2023**  
**Preached at Saint Aidan Episcopal Church, Portland, Oregon**  
**Isaiah 62:6-7, 10-12; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:1-20**

Not that long ago a mother and her son got into a hassle over whether or not the son was going to go to church. She kept insisting that he go, and he kept saying things like, “Aw, Mom, I just don’t wanna go. I’m tired of going to church. It’s so boring. I really wanna stay home.” Finally she had enough. “Look,” she said, “you’re going to go to church, and you’re going to go for two reasons. For one thing, you’re sixty-three years old, – and for another, you’re the **Rector** of that parish!”

Well, I have to admit it: *all* of us, clergy included, experience something of a tension in our relationship with the church, even at Christmas. On the one hand, there is God’s call to each and every one of us to live a more abundant life rooted and grounded in God, inspired by the Holy Spirit. It’s a kind of divine summons to a life of love, a life of service to others, a life of commitment to God.

But on the other hand, there is our hesitancy to respond to that call—our reluctance to answer the divine summons, our uncertainty about giving up the illusion that *we* are in control; our unwillingness to enter into those new, uncharted areas of life where God may lead us. If we are honest, we have to admit our reticence to reach out in love, our innately self-serving nature and our fear of committing the whole of our lives to God.

Divine love and human frailty: that is really what we celebrate tonight. On this holy night we commemorate the birth of the One who loved us so much that he took upon himself our humanity, with all of its weakness and all of its complexity. Tonight we celebrate Divine Love in frail human flesh!

We all love Christmas because of the feelings of warmth and familiarity that it brings: the church decorated with poinsettias and Christmas greenery, the crèche on full display, the best vestments and finest silver, the wonderful music and carols, the familiar Gospel story from Luke, and, of course, the joy of families reunited. But I have to confess that one of the reasons I like Christmas so much is that it really makes perfect sense!

When you love someone, you want to share in that person's life as much as possible. Just ask any two young lovers! What better way could God have chosen to show the extent of God's love for us, than to share in *our* life. God did not choose to come to us as some kind of benevolent ruler from on high. Rather, God came as one of us, as a human being with all that humanity involves: all its frailty, all its weakness, all its complexity.

Our God comes to earth and is present with us, *not* as a warrior-King, *not* as a great and wise teacher—but rather as a simple and vulnerable child. The birth of Jesus is God's affirmation of what it means to be human. And in the midst of the lights and the decorations and the parties, **that** is the truth we so easily forget, within the Church no less than outside it. The birth of Jesus is God's affirmation of what it means to be human. At its heart, Christmas is God's resounding "yes" to our humanity.

I knew a priest whose ministry was working full-time as a hospital chaplain. Every evening it was his practice to visit those patients who were having surgery the next day. One night he walked into a woman's room only to be met by an angry voice which declared that she had no use either for the Church or for God, and just wanted him to go away. But as he turned to leave, he said to her, "I wish you wouldn't think of me as a representative of the church, but simply as another human being who cares about you."

Several days later, the priest was walking down that same hall when a voice called out to him from one of the rooms: "O human being, O human being." He went into the room and talked to the woman who had been deeply hurt by the Church many years before: a church which seemed to demand that she be someone whom she was not; a church which asked her to deny the pain and darkness in her life; a church which asked her to ignore all her doubts.

That woman had decided that a church like that wasn't worth going to—and she was right! Because a church that would deny the fullness and complexity of our humanity, is a church which denies the Divine Love who was pleased to make our flesh God's home. That kind of church misses the point of the Incarnation. That kind of church doesn't understand that in Jesus God is with us, and not only when we act in a certain way or when we say a particular prayer. No, our God has taken our human flesh and is with us just as we are—in all the fullness of our humanity; in its frailty and weakness and complexity.

God *never* asks us to be someone other than who we really are. God simply desires that we *discover* our identity, who we are called to be. This is why God's love does not depend on our ability to earn it (as if we could!). God does not choose us because we do what is right or think what is right. God loves us unconditionally and simply desires the very best for each one of us. God only asks that we open our hearts and minds to the Holy Spirit and offer our lives—just as they are—to God. Only then can **God** transform us.

I am honored to have been with you at Saint Aidan's over the past few months, and to have had the opportunity to share in your journey—your very *human* journey. I have no doubt that over the past year, there are many for whom this journey has been far from easy: there has been sorrow and pain; there has been abuse and addiction; there have been some who have lost their jobs; there have been families in conflict and crisis; there has been separation and divorce; there have been tragic accidents and injury to the living; there has been eyesight or hearing or mental faculties lost to the elderly; there has been cancer and heart attacks and strokes and fear about health; there has been the loss of those we have loved; and, of course, for some there has been death.

And yet, what a beautiful thing it is to see your faces all aglow with the light of this Holy Night. It is beautiful because that is the way that God sees each one of us—in the darkness of our *human* journey, with nothing to offer but the weakness, frailty and complexity of our lives.

But tonight, as we celebrate the enfleshment of God, we proclaim to the world that our journey is a *divine* journey: that all our frailty and weakness and complexity are already *within God*. And we are aglow because within each of us God sees the possibility that you and I can reflect the divine light, that we can live out the divine love—the very same light and love which was made manifest in the humble birth of a baby so many years ago.

God invitation is extended to each one of us once again on this Holy Night: Come home! Come home! Come home to God’s love. Come home to a life transformed by God. Come home to a world in which God is at the center. Christmas is God’s gracious invitation to celebrate the Divine Love personally, by welcoming Jesus into our hearts and lives, not just once a year, but every day of our lives.

I pray that God will richly bless us this Christmas as we make our way once again to the manger to celebrate divine love and human frailty. Come home—not just for tonight—but throughout the year. Accept the divine “yes” to our humanity in all its frailty, weakness and complexity, — and then *live* so that each and every day of your life is a celebration of the Word made flesh.