



# SERMONS AT SAINT MARK'S

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THE VERY REV. STEVEN L. THOMASON, DEAN AND RECTOR

THE FEAST OF CHRISTMAS, DECEMBER 24, 2024

ISAIAH 62:6-12; PSALM 97; TITUS 3:4-7; LUKE 2:1-20

## THE VULNERABLE TRUTH OF CHRISTMAS

I've spent most of my adult life as an insider in the health care system. As a physician, and more lately as a priest, calling on parishioners at their hospital bedside, I have enjoyed the privilege of my uniforms of credentialed power—stole and stethoscope—that allow me to pass through the doors of authority and access with relative impunity.

More recently, I am of an age that necessarily requires I see the system from the other side, as patient in need of surgical repair of body parts that are showing signs of ailing now, or to have some preventive surveillance procedure aimed at early detection. It's been a good lesson for me, to be on the other side of things, and one I think every health care

professional should have as part of their formative training.

I recently read an essay by Peter Marty which got me thinking about this once again.<sup>1</sup> If you've ever had a surgery, I suspect your experience went something like this: you arrive early, hear your name called, are shown to a small drape-drawn section of a larger suite that has many preop patients undertaking similar rituals. You're told to strip bare, wipe down with antiseptic towelettes, then slip your arms into a laughable scrap of a gown that ties in the back but leaves a good deal of flesh exposed to the beehive of activity around you. Ill-fitting socks with nonslip strips and a blanket are

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<sup>1</sup> These themes of health care and vulnerability are inspired by an essay by Peter Marty, *The Christian Century*, Dec. 2024.

meant to be creature comforts in an otherwise spartan experience. Your belongings go in a plastic bag; they are now the least of your worries.

The relays of nurses and doctors try to close the curtain before they leave each time, but there always seems to be a gap, for you to be seen or see others in their cells.

My point is this: It is all an exercise in vulnerability, and I am reminded of a line from Elizabeth Rooney's poem "*Unfrocked*:" "*My nakedness embarrasses me, Lord...*"<sup>2</sup>

Not a far stretch from Eden's skimpy fig leaves.

Opportunities for our American health care system to improve its delivery of care notwithstanding, I do think the experience, or other vulnerable versions of it, have something to teach us. Our culture eschews vulnerability. Lies about it. Covers it up. Denies it at great cost.

Rooney's poem goes on to say:

*"I am accustomed to some shreds of self-deception*

*Patches of pretense, coverings of conceit."*

But if we set aside self-deception, pretense and conceit, we will admit that to be human is to be vulnerable. We come into the world naked, without a weaponized defense of fangs or venom, no camouflage or cover, just an unembarrassed nakedness of newborn glory. Somehow, we celebrate this for infants, then spend the rest of our lives striving to hide it away, acclimating instead to the "shreds of self-deception."

This is the scandalous gift of Christmas, friends: that God sees fit to come into the world, not as invulnerable and invincible conqueror armed to the hilt, but as an impoverished, unhoused immigrant born to a teen mother in a part of the world which is famished for peace. This infant Jesus even becomes a refugee with his parents (fleeing from Bethlehem through Gaza into Egypt) to avoid the protuberant ego of a despotic king whose puffed-up chest of power belies a whittling fear of insecure self-doubt. Herod would kill all the little boys of Bethlehem rather than admit his own vulnerable existence.

It seems like we haven't learned the Herodian lesson yet—that the politics of power mongering may claim to raise up invulnerable saviors bent on correcting what

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<sup>2</sup> As cited by Peter Marty in his essay.

is wrong with the world, but in truth there is little salvific value to be gleaned from hateful violence that inevitably erupts amidst the anxiety-riddled resistance to true vulnerability.

In Christmas, God is inviting us to see a different way of being in the world, a different way in life. In Jesus, God is inviting us to see the naked defenseless infant, not a sideshow to the main act of modern glory-seeking, but precisely the antidote to it, and to our self-deception, pretense and conceit, if and when we become complicit with the age-old lie of invulnerability that convinces us that violence is the reasonable way forward.

Even as the world seems bent on falling into the fires of chaos and degradation, the church—this cathedral church—exists not as invulnerable bastion of human glory, but as beacon of hope—hope that we humans might unfold to a humble way of being like Jesus, and hope that God, dwelling among us, might upend the powers and principalities of consumptive ego in subversive ways.

This is the embodied truth of Christmas.

To wish one another a merry Christmas is to wish for precisely that: to wish that we are able to reclaim our incarnate beauty and vulnerable goodness which even God sees fit to celebrate, and to hope and trust that God

is subverting the wiles of the world as a way of saving it, even if we cannot see the fully unfurled reality of that just yet.

One of the blessings we employ here at Saint Mark's on Sundays at the close of services is drawn from St. Paul's first letter to the early Thessalonian church, which was beset by woes we would find very familiar today—political, social, economic, and otherwise. I offer part of the blessing here, as an exhortation to live by such values in our time, and know that when we do, the Christmas story becomes ever more real in our lives, and in our world, here and now.

This is the blessing along with a few more lines that Paul beseeches us to consider:

*Go forth into the world in peace*

*Be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good.*

*Render to no one evil for evil.*

*Encourage the faint-hearted, support those in need, be patient with all of them.*

*Rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you!*

*And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.*

Which is to say... Merry Christmas, dear friends!

**Luke 2:1-20** *[In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.]*



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