

Addendum: The last quarter of this sermon was preached extemporaneously. In the extemporaneous portion I make a comparison between the killing by police of unarmed men in the United States, the massacre at Marikana in South Africa by state police, and the murder of Jesus Christ by the Roman Empire. I suggest that all of those murdered in these scenarios were pacifists. It would be proper to note that some of the miners that were killed at Marikana *were* armed. However, it is also noteworthy that the violence incited by the South African police could have been diverted. It is important to ask the questions, “what were the working conditions of the Lonmin Mine that drove the mine workers to protest?”, and “how could have the violence that ensued between the South African police and the Lonmin Mine workers been diverted via an acknowledgement of the poor working conditions and lack of pay by the Lonmin Mine company?” The most appropriate relation between the turmoil in the U.S., the massacre at Marikana, and the death of Jesus Christ is not necessarily that everyone in each predicament was unarmed, but rather a type of collusion between entities with buying power (whether that be corporations or governments) and military police forces, not to negotiate with, but to exterminate oppressed citizens who are simply looking for a better quality of life, fair pay, and dignity.

Go Forth in Humble Praise

Sermon

4 January 2015

2nd Sunday After Christmas

*When the star in the sky is gone,
When the Kings and Princes are home,
When the Shepherds are back with their flocks,
The work of Christmas begins.*

*To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To teach the nations,
To bring Christ to all,
To make music in the heart.*

May I speak in the name of the Creator, the Redeemer, and the Sustainer... Amen.

INTRODUCTION

Good morning!

Happy New Year!

...and Merry Christmas!

On behalf of the clergy and staff here at the Cathedral Church of St. Michael and St. George, I greet you with abounding joy as we commence a new year. And we hope that you all had a blessed and peaceful festive season.

It is, indeed, a blessing that each of us here have been granted another year of life, another opportunity to gather in this spiritual community, and it is a blessing that we have been entrusted

with the task to begin the work of Christmas. Throughout this service I hope that you will keep in your prayers all of those who have lost their lives this festive season. And it is my hope that you will also keep in your prayers all of our friends and family members who are still travelling.

WORK OF CHRISTMAS: BEGINNINGS AND ENDINGS

The poem that I recited at the beginning of this sermon was written by my spiritual hero, Howard Thurman. It is entitled, “The Work of Christmas.” Now, some of you might be saying, “well, Christmas is over. Why is he going on about Christmas?” And on one level you are correct: Christmas day is over. But, in the liturgical life of the Anglican Church the last day of Christmas is the 5th of January. The Christmas story begins with the birth of Christ; but, it does not end there. And I believe that Howard Thurman’s poem, “The Work of Christmas,” is a proper postlude to Christmas day, and an appropriate accompaniment to both the continuation of the Christmas spirit, and the availing of a new year.

The concept of beginnings and endings is a significant theme this morning. The first, and most necessary to note, is the wisdom of Howard Thurman—when Christmas day ends the real work of Christmas begins. But, also, the significance of beginnings and endings is also present in our Gospel reading.

*Jesus proclaimed: ‘To believe in me, is
Not to believe in me but in him who sent
Me; to see me, is to see him who sent
Me. I have come into the world as light,
So that no one who has faith in me should
Remain in darkness. But if anyone hears
My words and disregards them, I am not
His judge; I have not come to judge the
World, but to save the world. There is a
Judge for anyone who rejects me and does
Not accept my words; the word I have
Spoken will be his judge on the last day.
I do not speak on my own authority,
But the Father who sent me has himself
Commanded me what to say and how to
Speak. I know that his commands are
Eternal life. What the Father has said to
Me therefore—that is what I speak.’*

Our Gospel reading is the last seven verses of the twelfth chapter in John’s gospel. The twelfth chapter of John also contains the readings traditionally used for Palm Sunday and Maundy Thursday—two very significant days in the week leading up to Christ’s death and resurrection.

The very clever organizers of our lectionary have borrowed a literary technique known as the fragmented or nonlinear narrative. When an author employs a fragmented narrative—meaning a story that is out of order—she wants to convey two things. The first thing that she wants to convey is the foreshadowing of an ongoing anxiety in the life of the main character. The second thing that she wants to convey is that there is something more significant in the text than the ending alone.

FORESHADOWED ANXIETY

There might be grumbles amongst the congregation, “wait... first he insists that we’re *still* in Christmas, and now he’s all the way in Holy Week?”

Well, simply put, “yes!”

But, this is precisely the point. Using a text during Christmastide that is traditionally assigned to Holy Week is a foreshadowing of the anxiety that comes with beginning the work of Christmas. To find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to teach the nations, to bring Christ to all, these are all encounters that will be met with opposition, they are all encounters with anxiety. In the section of John chapter 12 that is reserved for the foot washing on Maundy Thursday, when Judas Iscariot tells Jesus to admonish Mary for washing his feet with an expensive perfume, Jesus responds to Judas by saying, “Leave her alone...the poor you have always among you, but you will not always have me.” And Jesus returns to this kind of humility in today’s gospel reading, at the end of the twelfth chapter of John’s gospel. He directs the attention away from himself as an object of worship, and back to the cause at hand, which is to bring light into the world. Therefore the work of Christmas isn’t simply Christ being born into the world as a light to enlighten the nations, but the work of Christmas is also for us. It is for us to believe in and live seriously the words which he spoke, words which helped to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to teach the nations...

SOMETHING MORE: MUSIC IN THE HEART

And yet, Howard Thurman also wrote that the work of Christmas is to make music in the heart. Our Psalm for today, Psalm 147, reads...

Jerusalem, sing to the Lord;

Zion, praise your God,

...

He sends cold, and the water

Stands frozen;

He utters his word, and the ice is melted;

He makes the wind blow, and the

Water flows again.

When we believe in and live seriously the word of God spoken through Jesus, to find the lost, to heal the broken, to feed the hungry, to release the prisoner, to teach the nations, when we do the work that brings us face to face with anxiety, we must remember that salvation is not ours alone, and that the anxiety and death which we encounter in doing the work of Christmas is not the end game. As children of God, when we come face to face with anxiety and death, we must make music so sweet that the water of life begins to flow again.