

“Love Incarnate”

John 1:6-8, 19-28

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December 11, 2011

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John the Baptist is a very likeable guy. His role is to bear witness to the Light. That is, he was to be the one to announce to the world that the love of God has taken on flesh, has become a human being to share our common lot! If John could have reduced his message to a bumper sticker, it might have read: ‘God Remains Aloof No Longer!’ Or, ‘The Invisible Has Become Visible.’ Or, ‘Come Meet God’s Messiah; No Appointment Needed. Walk-ins Welcome.’

You get the idea. It may sound fairly simple, but it was risky business in those days, to announce a Savior’s coming. Not everyone would welcome this turn of events, this introduction of an authority figure with a radically different kind of authority; not the authority that comes with coup-d’etat, or with elected office or with wearing a crown or even a stole. The authority of the Savior is that which comes with loving so boldly, so selflessly, so outrageously that the whole world comes to an abrupt halt, and declares, **‘I want to love like that!’**

Anne Alvord introduced me to the idea that Jesus is God’s best show-and-tell. Do you remember show-and-tell? Do elementary school children still bring objects from home to the classroom and reveal what really goes on at home? As a child, I loved show and tell. As a parent, I dreaded it! I dreaded that twenty-five 8 year olds would have a glimpse into life at 70 Homestead Drive. But mostly I remember each child’s joy in selecting some visual aid and stuffing it into a backpack and heading off to school joyfully anticipating show and tell, the chance to let Hopewell School know something of the home front.

So, I have this mental picture of God, in child-like fashion, preparing for the best show and tell ever, pondering how to reveal to the world, tangibly, who God really is! What visual aid could God come up with?

In the lowly manger, we see God is vulnerable. And that is how it always is when love gets a hold of us. Love renders us vulnerable. And who wants to be vulnerable? Our culture doesn't promote it. It is in becoming vulnerable that God becomes accessible and real and undeniable. Thus, Christmas is an invitation for humanity to give love a try, to replace revenge with love; to replace hatred with love; to replace prejudice with love.

John the Baptist doubted that the world was ready for a vulnerable God. He saw that the world hoped for a great warrior God, a mighty Goliath God. Thus, his preaching landed, for the most part, on deaf ears.

And it is true to this day: if we want to have one of those life-changing encounters with the sacred, we must allow ourselves to become vulnerable; allow ourselves to love the one who is hard to love. Just take a moment right now. Who in your life is the one hardest to accept, hardest to love? Getting ready for Christmas has something to do with figuring out how on earth we are going to love that one who is so difficult to love. Christmas calls us to make ourselves vulnerable even as God made God's self vulnerable in the stable behind the inn. Christmas is downright counter-cultural.

It is said that the Russian czar, Peter the Great, stood about 6 feet 8 inches tall. Wanting to understand what life was really like for the serfs and the ordinary people, he would put on peasant clothing and walk out into the market places and coffee shops and street corners, always hoping to catch a flavor of the common life, to grasp the meaning of what it meant to be just a regular person.

Though Peter the Great meant well in becoming vulnerable, hoping to identify with the plight of his people, his extraordinary height always spoiled his charade. He'd have to hustle back to the security of the czar's palace lest he be mobbed by the street people. And that he did. When recognized as the supreme authority of the land, he scurried back behind the stonewalls.

When God took on the form of a human being in the person of the baby Jesus, God did not have a safe palace to retreat to. God's vulnerability was no game, no afternoon fling with the commoners. God's vulnerability was a bold, dangerous move to show the world what becomes possible when love is more than a nice idea, when love is incarnate, when love is not intimidated by any other authority.

In a way, I am pleased we were able to reschedule our celebration of the South Church saints to this morning, to this Advent Sunday whose theme is LOVE. As I read down through the names added to our wreath today, it is love that leaps off the page:

the love of a husband, the love of a mother, the love of a singer, the love of a servant disciple, the love of a neighbor who would do anything for you, the love of a special aunt, the love of a friend.

All these names are evidence of love incarnate, love made real.

I like that John the Baptist man. I picture him at his desk with a pile of invitations and envelopes, with one of those old-fashioned pens and a bottle of ink. I see him working late into the night addressing the envelopes to the 917 members of South Church. Inside, the invitation simply reads, 'come and see the miracles that still happen when people dare to make love incarnate.'

That's what came to me this week as I wrestled with those verses from John's Gospel. As always, I share my reflection with you in the greatest of hope. Amen.

