

CHRISTMAS: BECOME WHO YOU ARE

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
December 24, 2010 - Christmas Eve
Luke 2:1-14

Welcome and happy, happy Christmas to everyone! Welcome to devout Christians, to not-so-devout Christians, to people of all faiths and people of no faith or uncertain faith. Welcome to seekers, to townspeople, to visitors from near and far. Welcome to grumpy spouses who would rather be dozing by the fire, to reluctant college students dragged here by their parents, to hangers-on of all sorts, to children up way, way past their bedtimes with visions of sugar plums already dancing in their heads. Welcome to the curious, welcome to the doubtful, welcome to those who sneer at faith and to those who live by faith.

For most of us, Christmas is a time that is filled with memories, layer upon layer of memories of Christmases past. And it's a funny thing about Christmas memories – even though they may be tinged with loss and sadness, they also almost always carry a kind of hope. Hope for the future. Hope that God may be giving birth in us to a life of wholeness and grace – “the life abundant,” as Jesus called it. The kind of life we all want but are sometimes too timid to say we want. Somehow, at Christmas, the future seems open. I imagine that this hope, however slender, is part of what brought you here tonight.

The memories that return to me most powerfully each Christmas are childhood ones. The piercing cold of my little hometown in Massachusetts. The pitch blackness of the sky. The crèche in my parish church. The figures of the shepherds and Mary and Joseph and the baby seemed almost alive to me as a

child. My mother singing “Silver Bells” as she basted the turkey (she thought she could sing). The ornaments we hung on the tree, the most precious objects of my childhood, the feel of them in my fingers and the fear that I might break one. The enormous snow banks, back in the days when it *really* snowed in New England – remember? The exact sensation of my boots breaking through the hard crust of snow as I slipped outside late on Christmas Eve to look at the old-fashioned colored lights that my Dad arranged with mathematical precision on the branches of the yews outside the front door. The way the soft heat from each bulb melted the snow around it, and made for each colored light a kind of halo. The piercing cold. The stars thrown like spangles across the night sky, all of it proclaiming the message of the angels: that at Christmas, God touches down upon the earth, and makes us his own by becoming one of us. Reach back in your memories, and find there the particular way the Word made flesh has lived in you.

Here's another Christmas memory, from Buzz Aldrin (remember him?), one of the astronauts who were the first men on the moon. He was also an Episcopalian – who knew? Part of his story as the first man on the moon is largely unknown. As the Apollo 8 spaceship catapulted through the heavens toward the moon on Christmas Eve 1968, the astronauts took turns reading from the Book of Genesis. That could never happen today! But there was even more to the story. I read to you now from Buzz Aldrin's writings about the moon landing:

“On the day of the moon landing, we awoke at 5:30am, Houston time. Neil Armstrong and I separated from Mike Collins in the command module. Our powered descent was right on schedule. With only seconds’ worth of fuel left, we touched down on the moon at 3:30pm [on Christmas Eve].

Now was the moment for Communion. So I unstowed the elements in their flight packets. I put them and the Scripture reading on the little table in front of the abort guidance-system computer. Then I called back to Houston. ‘Houston, this is Eagle. This is Lunar Module Pilot speaking. I would like to request a few moments of silence. I would like to invite each person listening in, wherever and whomever he may be, to contemplate for a moment the events of the past few hours and to give thanks in his own individual way.’

For me, this meant taking communion. In the blackout I opened the little plastic packages which contained the bread and wine. I poured the wine into the chalice my parish had given me. In the one-sixth gravity of the moon, the wine curled slowly and gracefully up the cup. It was interesting to think that the very first liquid ever poured on the moon, and the first food eaten there, were consecrated elements.

Just before I partook of the elements, I read the words which I had chosen to indicate our trust that as man probes into space, we are in fact acting in Christ.

I sensed especially strongly my unity with our church back home, and with the Church everywhere. I read: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me, and I in him, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me.’”

How remarkable, that the first human act on the moon wasn’t the walk on the moon, but an act of worship and intimacy with God. And yet it seems so long ago, not just in chronological time, but in terms of how we think about things. Then, we thought that one of the final challenges we faced as humans was the so-called conquering of outer space. Buzz Aldrin’s memory tells of the day that we frail humans brought even God to the moon. But what a poignant testimony to what now

seems like the naïveté of that time, almost a half century ago.

Things are different now. We have changed. We are twenty-first century people. We are not so confident, not so sure of ourselves. Was it 9/11 that changed things by giving us memories of a sorrow so large that they will companion us forever? Or was 9/11 only the sign of what was already well underway, some sea change in a world increasingly in love with enmity and death? Wars we can’t win or get out of; 12-year-olds getting recruited into terrorism; political discourse log-jammed in verbal hostility; the rich refusing to see the reality of the life of the poor; teenagers cyber-bullying each other literally to death; suicide among young people on the rise everywhere; religion less and less relevant except as a tool of terrorism and divisiveness; distrust and cynicism abounding. Every year at Christmas, the government raises the terror alert. I guess that says it all.

What has happened to our sense of the holy? Where is our sense of the high calling given to us by virtue of our humanity? Tonight we celebrate the fact that as the German theologian Karl Rahner said, human is what God decided to be when he decided not to come to us as God. And so we should all be walking around breathless, in awe of other humans as vessels of the divine life. We should be kneeling at each others’ feet! But we’re not. Because as the Archbishop of Canterbury said, “When society believes in nothing, the only agenda is fear.”

I think we know now that it is not outer space, but inner space, that we need to attend to. There is an inner country in our hearts where we are alone, where only God can dwell. Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem once, but he is born again and again and again within. It is here that the abundant life and the peace of the world begin. And so who or what occupies that

space in you will make all the difference for your life, and for the life of the world.

Tonight I invite you to take a look at what is already enthroned in your heart, at what you already worship or value the most. It could be anything. It could be a pile of Hermes scarves. Your career. Your home. Your elliptical and the body it helps you maintain. Is it a bottle of bourbon? Is it a destructive relationship you can't give up because you're afraid to imagine yourself without it? Or perhaps it's your perfect children whom you don't allow to embarrass you by failing at anything? Or, if you're a kid, is it an acceptance letter from a college someone else has told you is "worth going to"? Or maybe it's your ability to be so perfectly mean to other kids because you're scared of who they are because you're scared of who you are?

Well, we're all afraid. That's why the Bible keeps telling us, as it does tonight, to not be afraid. But because fear is our default mode, we all tend to worship the wrong thing. We think it will keep us safe. It gets us somewhere in the short run, or we think it does, but it leaves us empty and hungry in the long run. Almost every person who has come to me for spiritual counsel in the last twenty-five years has come because they are worshipping something that's not worthy of worship, usually some form of power, some way we can fool ourselves that life is something we can control or manage. We can't.

Putting the power down is the first step toward letting God be born in your life. Because it means we do what God did at Christmas: He put down the love of power, and took up instead the power of love. When we do the same, we become real human beings. Nothing else will ever set us free. Nothing else will ever satisfy our heart's desire. You know, we don't stage these Christmas Eve services in some kind of bubble separated from the real world so you can have a nice Christmas and pretend life is

something that it's not. We do it to remind you, in the most beautiful and gentle and loving way possible, that you can *become* something – someone who helps transform the world. And so tonight, we are asked to become who we are.

I remember, a long time ago, listening to a story on National Public Radio. It was an extended interview with a warden who was in charge of death row inmates in a prison in Texas. He was looking back on his career, and in response to some gentle questions from the interviewer, he admitted how terrible his job had been. How he had hated it, and for many years had not been able to admit it. It was heart-rending, not least in part because he talked about his job with such dignity and intelligence. The most moving part of it was at the end, when the interviewer asked him if he could remember specifically what it was like to be present with an inmate when he was executed, as it was his responsibility to be. The warden paused, and then he said, "After the lethal injection was given, the man had less than a minute of consciousness left before he died. During that minute, most men would sing." And the surprised interviewer said, "They would sing? What would they sing?" And the warden said, "Well, most of them sang 'Silent Night.' Before the injection took effect, they were usually able to get as far as 'round yon virgin mother and child.'

I have never forgotten that warden's remarkable memory, and the even more remarkable reality it represents: that deep down, every human being knows what his or her heart's true treasure is to be found – 'round yon virgin mother and child,' in a love we see in the face of God, whose heart's desire is for the healing of the world. You don't have to go to the moon for that love. It's your birthright. And it's been only a breath away ever since Jesus came to stay and to live the one short life on earth his Father gave him. You have only one short life too. Let it be *for* something. Become who you are.