

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

JESUS SOLD SEPARATELY

A CHRISTMAS SERMON

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards

Christmas Eve, 2012

Luke 2:1-20

Happy, Happy Christmas and welcome to St. Mark's Church.

Some of you may have visited our excellent parish bookstore and gift shop, The Lion's Den. This year our bookstore manager, Melanie Moyna, ordered all kinds of wonderful Christmas items, including a very beautiful statue, made in France, of the Virgin Mary holding the newborn Christ child.

When the statue arrived, Melanie was surprised to see that the box contained only the figure of Mary. There was no Jesus. And so she called the manufacturer and said, "I'm afraid there's been a mistake. We got Mary, but you forgot to put in Jesus." And the gentleman said, "Oh, Jesus is sold separately!" And Melanie asked, "We didn't know that. How much does he cost?" And the man said, "Jesus is sold for \$79.95."

Now the staff has been laughing about "Jesus sold separately" for weeks, but it got me thinking about how we hold Jesus in our hearts, minds, and imaginations as post-modern

Christians. Because I think there is a sense in which - for both religious and cultural reasons - *Jesus has become separated from his story*. That he is now, in a way that he has never been before, sold separately.

I hope you will not be disappointed to learn that the story of Jesus' birth that we heard in tonight's beautiful passage from Luke is an imaginative re-telling. We really have no idea when, where, or in what circumstances Jesus was born. But that's not to say that the Scriptural passage is some kind of fairy tale. Every detail of the story tells us something important about the meaning of Jesus' birth. What could be more powerful than that detail about Mary putting Jesus into a manger, a feeding trough for animals, when he was destined to become bread for the world? And how wonderful that the angels make their first announcement of the birth of the man who would restore humanity's connection with God to shepherds, who by virtue of their jobs were considered religiously persona non

grata and therefore separated from God. God came first to those who needed him most.

But we forget about the richness and depth of Jesus' story sometimes. At Christmas, especially, it is easy to tame him. "The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Are you kidding? Jesus was a human baby. He cried his head off. Of course we need to honor the precious vulnerability of the newborn Jesus. But sometimes it seems to me that we don't want to release him from the swaddling clothes that Mary bound him up with.

Jesus is not frozen in time any more than you and I are. He is not an inert figure in a nativity set that we take out every year. He was born into the real world, this dangerous world, as every child always has been. Because there have never, ever been any places where bad things are not supposed to happen. Only days after he was born, Herod massacred hundreds of children in Bethlehem hoping that Jesus was among them. Only days after that, Jesus and his family became refugees and displaced people in Egypt. Always, Jesus lived in poverty. And because he had so little, because he knew danger and death, he had room in his heart for the world to enter it and set him free.

From the time he was a child, Jesus embraced this world as it is. He broke out of those swaddling clothes. He grew up. He let life happen to him, all

of it. Jesus was born into a story in which death ruled. Physical death at the hands of the Roman oppressors and spiritual death within the dying temple system. But it was still the same world we live in - a world in which people have hope. And he saved the world by joining the world's story and giving himself to it.

I think the events of the past couple of weeks in our country have made it clear that we must choose how to live. You can buy the Jesus sold separately, the \$79.95 Jesus, bring him out at Christmas to cherish as an infant, and then pack him away for next year. That is, we can choose to live a protected, isolated existence in the realm of the personal, the familial, the religiously naïve and irrelevant, and the virtual. We can try to make sure our kids are safe and that other people are blamed for what goes wrong by engaging in identity politics and claiming Jesus for our side. My dear friends, life is not about rights and privileges. Life is about giving yourself away.

It's ironic. What makes us feel safe often puts us in the greatest danger. The greatest danger is to survive but to be locked into the prison of your self, your home, your screens. Americans are lonely, fearful people, many of us. And I can't help but think that one of the reasons those of us who are Christians are lonely and fearful is that we worship the wrong Jesus. We ask the sweet baby Jesus who sees this broken world not to cry over it. We

worship Jesus as personal guru; Jesus as political party chaplain; the “spiritual but not religious” Jesus who stays safely away from worship of the living God and service to God’s living people. This is the Jesus who costs only \$79.95 and is sold separately from real life.

What we celebrate tonight is the birth of something very big and very powerful – the living, healing, redeeming presence of God in our world. It is about the coming of a God who cannot be silenced by anything or enlisted for anything. Christmas is not a moment to savor that is somehow out of real time. It was a moment in real time that sanctified everything that happens in real time. Which means that each of us needs to let Christ be born in us and not say as the innkeepers did: “No room at this inn.” ”No room in this heart.” In a sense, each of us is like Mary. You and I are always holding something in our arms – but for us, it’s not a baby; it’s the future of the world. You have the space inside you to hold the Christ and to do his healing work. Bread for the world. Reconnection with God. This is your birthright.

Christianity is a social religion. It’s a religion about how we find God by becoming humans and by giving actual, specific, flesh-and-blood care to others. It’s a religion for grown-ups who live in the real world.

The infant Jesus is now the resurrected Jesus, who has been released from

anything that has ever tried to hold him: his swaddling clothes; the love of his parents, who like any parents wanted their child to survive; his own religion, which tried to keep him under wraps; and finally the cross itself, by which we tried finally to silence and destroy him. But Jesus is now free from the bounds of time and space. He walks, now, at the edges of our lives. He is always there, waiting for us to see him. And he awakens what lies at the core of our being – our humanity, that part of us that knows that our true joy is in living a life for others. You can’t buy Jesus separately. That’s not the way he comes. There’s no “sold separately” for us, either. We were made to be together, to live for each other.

Join the human story. That’s what Jesus did. You do it, too.

Amen.