

A SERMON FROM ST. MARK'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH

NEW CANAAN, CONNECTICUT

GOD SAVES

JESUS AS THE WORD OF FORGIVENESS

The Reverend Anne F. C. Richards
December 30, 2012 ~ The First Sunday after Christmas
John 1:1-18

As you may know, we have this famous passage from John as our gospel every year on the first Sunday after Christmas. Each year, I notice something different about it. This year, what jumped out at me was all the language about *Jesus as the Word*.

This week between Christmas and New Year's is a peculiar time. The crush of Christmas is over. The new year is not yet here. Our hearts might feel a little battered. More than at other times of the year, we sense ourselves living within the calendar:

Thanksgiving....Christmas...New Year's....the long, dark winter. Once again we are going through that cycle. And yet, for this one week, time slows down a little. I think it's a liminal time, a time of in-betweeness, and therefore a time of spiritual opportunity. And so, just a few thoughts about what Jesus as the Word might mean for us.

Before I came to St Mark's, I taught at an Episcopal school in the city. One of the courses I taught was the third grade Old Testament class. The kids – most of whom had never encountered the Bible before - were always surprised to learn that the Bible was not written in English. I asked them to guess what language it was written in. “German? Italian? Japanese?” they would guess. Of

course, most of them had never heard of Hebrew.

I would also ask the kids what language they thought God speaks. Similar answers: “Spanish? Chinese? Russian?” “Nope,” I said. “God speaks the language of silence.” And though these little kids were only 8 years old, they understood immediately. God's language is silence. God does not communicate with us the way we do with each other, in words. Sometimes we wish He did, but he doesn't. God is silent and hidden. God is subtle. Once in a while, as the Bishop says, we might hear a kind of cough in the bushes that alerts us to the nearness of God and to God's attentiveness to us, but that's about it. And so when John tells us that Jesus is the Word of God, he's saying something really important, really ground-breaking.

The English writer Jeanette Winterson published a memoir recently called “Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?”. Something she says in the memoir really struck me: “*Words are the part of silence that can be spoken.*” This is a statement about writing, but it's also a statement about God. If God's language is silence, and Jesus is the Word of God, then Jesus is the part of God that can be spoken, the part of God that we can hear. It also means, I think, that when we use words with any kind of intention or artfulness, we

are trying to speak to and about God. *Because words are like lamps: They make something that is already real visible.*

I was thinking, this past week, of the beginning of the story of Jesus coming to us as the Word of God. The angel comes to the Virgin Mary and asks her to bear Jesus into the world, and Mary says yes. How amazing is it that the angel brings no directions from God to Mary about how Jesus should be raised! No instructions! Nothing like “Get this boy circumcised!” or “Make sure he goes to Hebrew School!” God mandates only one thing. He gives Mary only one word. He tells her what the child’s name will be. Jesus. And Jesus means “God saves.”

And so God’s word in Jesus is *forgiveness*. Jesus is the way that God saves us from sin, from death, and (sometimes the biggest problem of all), from ourselves.

Forgiveness is so amazing, *so of God*, that I think we almost always misunderstand it. We think of it as a feeling of kindness, or as an excuse we provide someone, some way of persuading ourselves that what happened didn’t really matter, something we confer (or not) on someone who has done something wrong. Forgiveness sounds like a really great idea until you have someone to forgive. And so many of us live our entire lives carrying around something we haven’t been able to forgive someone for. And when something very bad happens, like the killings in Newtown, we can’t imagine how the killer could ever be forgiven by anyone. Including God.

I think the world works on the principle that there is no real forgiveness. At least, no forgiveness that is not conditional on human understanding and personal goodwill. That’s why we can’t always forgive on our own power: Our understanding and our goodwill are always going to be limited. I can forgive the lady who stole the parking space from me,

but I’m not going to be able to forgive the guy who shot my dog. Ever. And so we all agree that forgiveness is the ideal, but we operate on the unspoken agreement that it is most often honored in the breach.

The big deal about Christianity is forgiveness. Because forgiveness re-starts the world when it’s all been shot to hell. And so forgiveness is actually much bigger than we imagine it to be – which is why Jesus had to come into the world to live it out and give his life to it. Forgiveness is not a feeling. It is not letting someone off the hook. It is not about liking someone. *To forgive someone is to hope that they will be restored to relationship with God. To accept forgiveness for yourself is to understand that your life stands in need of that grace and to have some hope for yourself.* Forgiveness fires up a new creation. When someone is forgiven, the world begins again.

And so forgiveness is not something that originates with us, something we dole out or confer. Forgiveness comes from God. We just have to get out of the way so it can reach people.

Within the Judaism that Jesus was raised in and tried to reform, forgiveness was essentially transacted. This is what today’s Epistle is trying to describe. When the law was broken, the law itself prescribed what was to be done to secure God’s forgiveness. It was essentially a system that put humans, not God, in charge of forgiveness. The later prophets began to hint that God was going to save us from the law, but how that was going to happen no one knew.

Well, it happened in Jesus. Jesus didn’t just speak forgiveness, he lived it. His whole life was about restoring people’s relationship with God. Jesus was a forgiveness genius. He was so gracious that he didn’t even demand that people be sorry for what they had done before he forgave them. When Jesus appeared to the disciples after the resurrection, he

didn't say to them, "Why did you desert me?" He said, "Peace be with you." And then he said to Peter, "Do you love me?" And Peter said, "Lord, you know I love you" – and a space opened up in Peter's heart so that he could repent. The power of Jesus' love was so great that his forgiveness gave people the space in which to change. His forgiveness was completely free of charge. This is how wild and generous God is.

Jesus showed us that forgiveness is not something that functions in linear time – that is, someone does something wrong; the offended party is wounded; the offended party thinks about forgiving the other person for awhile and finally summons up the goodwill to do it; all is well for awhile; then someone does something wrong again and the whole thing begins again and again and again. If you look at forgiveness in this way, you might be able to summon up the goodwill to forgive the Newtown killer Adam Lanza eventually, but sooner rather than later there will be another villain whom you will not be able to forgive because as the epistle says, so long as we are under the law, we are imprisoned by it.

And so forgiveness is not a moment in time. It's a way of being in the world. A way of understanding the incredible power and grace of God. A way of appreciating just how far God will go to save us. He will even become one of us. He will then allow us to kill him. He will then not kill us back.

Don't get me wrong. Forgiveness is tough stuff. Heavy lifting. Look up at that cross at the center of the reredos. It's always struck me as a little theologically incorrect, since it has Jesus reaching down to the man below him. That couldn't have really happened. I guess on one level, the sculptor meant to say that Jesus was helping the man by dying for him. But on another level, maybe we can also imagine that Jesus is inviting the man to join him on the cross in his ultimate work of

forgiveness. Forgiveness is crucifying business, because it demands that we die to our old understanding of who is really in charge of the world and be born again to God's will for peace on earth, goodwill to all. Which I guess is why every Sunday, in our post-communion prayer, we ask for strength and courage.

Words are the part of silence that can be spoken. Make what is already true real. Be the Word of God in God's world.

Amen.