

122412 Christmas Eve

“Dogs and Cats Living Together: Peace in the Coming of Christ”

I am an idealist in many ways. I believe we can and should live up to the ideals we have chosen to live by. There are our personal ideals, of course - things like truth, beauty or goodness. There are the ideals of the nation we live in, such as **Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness**. Your family may have certain ideals it lives by - honesty, support of one another, love of family above all other things. And there are the ideals of our faith.

An idealist believes our lives are defined by the ideas and commitments we have assented to. An idealist says that ideas themselves form reality. But as an idealist, I am brought down hard by the realism of the world. A realist believes we can never make full commitments except in relationship to the situation which is upon us in the moment. Things change fast and a realistic view of the world helps a person, above all other things, survive. The more I engage a realistic worldview, the more pessimistic I get. Pessimism says that the world universally disappoints and people even more so. Pessimists expect the worst in all situations. Sometimes, I believe, pessimists are secret optimists, because there is really only one direction you can go as a pessimist, and that is up. But optimism has problems of its own. If pessimists live in a constant expectation of disappointment, optimists live in a constant expectation of things either being better or getting better. Voltaire called them “Panglossians”, followers of his character “Pangloss” in his play “Candide”. And by Panglossians, he meant Christians. And by Christians, he meant the worst possible things. Voltaire was primarily a materialist. Materialism says that there is nothing except the material world and all philosophical and religious striving toward something beyond the physical is purely delusional.

I think that pretty much covers the territory of possible ways to approach the world. When events occur that happen far outside our realm of experience - something like the Sandy Hook shooting, or Hurricane Sandy, or an unexpected death in the family, or perhaps a good thing...we are confronted with what we do not know. We work quickly to fill in what we do not know with what we know, which is why it is a good thing to know where you stake out your personal worldview. Sometimes, events remain a mystery in why they occurred. But in our attempt to fill the unknown with the known, we can run into conflict, especially if you are a materialist and I am an idealist, or you are an optimist and I am a pessimist.

The story of the birth of Christ has been told over and over again over the course of 2,013 years. Idealists will say one thing about Jesus’ birth. Materialists another. Pessimists and optimists will say still another thing. Realists will have something else to say. But what is important, I believe, is how we are able to be with the mystery of Jesus Christ’s birth. Can it be a mystery, just for tonight? Can it be a thing we do not understand well for a day or two? What is it like to be in the presence of something so profound and amazing as this story which we tell again and again?

Scripture tells us this night is an incredible event, a time where the world stands still, where angels appear to shepherds, where heaven itself sings out, “*Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors!*” Mysterious things are at work in the birth of Jesus Christ. The world is

changing in ways that cannot necessarily be seen or even known. God's work is happening whether we notice or not.

The prophets of old had ways of speaking about this mysterious work, this mystery we would rather fill with our particular worldview to explain it to ourselves and others. Isaiah says the mystery of Christ's birth is like this:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.*

It goes on - cows and bears grazing and living together, children playing with pit vipers. This is a pretty wild vision of things. We say, on Christmas, this is what Jesus ushers into the world. It is a vast peace Isaiah envisions here; a peace which transforms not only human beings and how they live, but all of creation is altered and made to be peaceful.

I really dislike cats. I titled this sermon, "*Dogs and Cats Living Together*". Really, it could be titled, "*How I Never Want to Live with a Cat*". I know many of you have dogs and cats living together in your homes. I hope those of you in such a situation realize things could change very quickly if the cats actually do what I think they are planning for all of us. It is possible that cats are planetary interlopers bent on world domination and the command could come down at any time to act. Seriously, though, dogs and cats do not get along with one another unless something with a greater authority oversees the relationship. You, the human with dogs and cats in your house, are, against all appearances to yourself and perhaps the outside world, are the greater authority which allows dogs and cats to live together in a reasonable peace, which the dog loves and the cat tolerates.

The claim on Christmas Day is that God took on flesh and bone in order to be like us. The greater authority of our lives, God on High, has chosen to live among us, like us, to usher in God's peace, God's kingdom through Jesus Christ. That is definitely a day worthy of celebration. Under God's authority and sovereign vision, the Great Work begins small, like a baby in a manger. It begins with you, recognizing that God has come to you, for you. It begins with recognizing you are not God and that we put many things in the way of being with God. It begins with an acceptance that God changes things, and God changes things in strange and unusual ways, like sending a Son to take away the sins of the world, a Son who heals and breaks down barriers that harm and destroy our humanity, a Son who asks us to look beyond our narrow and particular worldviews. It begins by taking the risk, like Mary and Joseph, that God may indeed be calling you tonight to look for and follow the one whom we call the Prince of Peace.

Christ's birth means we place ourselves under a higher authority. Like the dog and the cat in your house, peace is only possible by having the humility to say, "You, O Lord, are the one who has power over me and my life." When we make that move, when we, like the shepherds in the field, stand next to the manger and wonder at the mystery of this new person, this new experience in our lives, we let go of all those things we felt we needed to define the unknown. Now, we let mystery fill us and define us.

In the presence of the new Christ, in the presence of others who have chosen to live in the mystery of God made visible, in the presence of a world now built on the power and imagination of God in all God's glory, what does my idealism, or your realism, or my pessimism, or your optimism or your materialism really mean?

Tonight, we are people of mystery. We celebrate the great mystery of God taking on a body. Tonight, we stand like little children at the edge of possibilities. Tonight, we share in a great vision, a vision which says, you and I are loved and chosen by God to be God's people. In this mystery and this moment, it is actually possible for wolves to live with lambs, leopards with goats, calves with lions, babies with rattlesnakes. In the mystery and power of Christ, it really is possible for you and I, for all the people we disagree with, for all the people we would rather exclude, to come together in peace and share in the love of God for all of Creation. Like the dogs and the cats living together in homes all across this land, it might be possible for you and I to be at peace with one another, loving neighbor and stranger alike.

Share in the mystery of Jesus Christ this day and may the light of that mystery change your world and change your coming year and may you have a very merry Christmas and Happy New Year. And watch out for your cat. Amen.