

December 13, 2015 Third Sunday of Advent
Being and Becoming Human, Awaiting Emmanuel

Musical Prelude

Greeting: Chorus from The Cure at Troy, by Seamus Heaney

First Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel, Green 54

Readings: excerpt from The Human Being, by Walter Wink; 1 John 3:2

Second Hymn: Love Divine, All Loves Excelling, Green 150

Joys and Concerns

Musical Interlude

Prayer: O Come, O Come Emmanuel

Third Hymn: This Little Light of Mine, Green 266

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Benediction: Let's Try to Be Human -- Adrian Mitchell

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Musical Postlude

Greeting:

Good morning Friends. Astrophysicist Carl Sagan wrote, in *Cosmos*, “*Every one of us is, in the cosmic perspective, precious. If a human being disagrees with you, let him live. In a hundred billion galaxies, you will not find another.*”

It happens that the cosmic perspective agrees with the perspective from our tradition, that every one of us is precious. We are the beloved children of God. The Children of Life itself. Today is the Third Sunday of Advent, and here we are, 40 or so of the only 7.3 billion humans around for a hundred billion galaxies. For our part of the planet, now is the time of the year when we wait in the dark, with hope that once more we will lift our faces and see that the Holy is among us, that God is being born into this world and this time.

Today I will both begin and end our worship together with poetry that speaks to our humanness. To begin, here is the **CHORUS from *The Cure At Troy*, a verse adaptation of *Sophocles' play Philoctetes*, by *Seamus Heaney*.**

*Human beings suffer,
They torture one another,
They get hurt and get hard.
No poem or play or song
Can fully right a wrong
Inflicted and endured.*

*The innocent in gaols
Beat on their bars together.
A hunger-striker's father
Stands in the graveyard dumb.
The police widow in veils
Faints at the funeral home.*

*History says, Don't hope
On this side of the grave.
But then, once in a lifetime
The longed-for tidal wave
Of justice can rise up,
And hope and history rhyme.*

*So hope for a great sea-change
On the far side of revenge.
Believe that a further shore*

*Is reachable from here.
Believe in miracles
And cures and healing wells.*

*Call miracle self-healing:
The utter, self-revealing
Double-take of feeling.
If there's fire on the mountain
Or lightning and storm
And a god speaks from the sky*

*That means someone is hearing
The outcry and the birth-cry
Of new life at its term.*

As we await the birth cry of new life at its term, let us join together in singing our first hymn, O Come, O Come Emmanuel.

First Hymn: O Come, O Come Emmanuel, Green 54

Readings

And this is the revelation: God is HUMAN...What does it mean to say that one of God's revealed aspects is human? ...Perhaps it is that becoming human is the task that God has set for human beings. And human beings have only a vague idea what it means to be human. Humanity errs in believing it is human. We are only fragmentarily human, fleetingly human, brokenly human. We see glimpses of our humanness, we can only dream of what a more humane existence and political order would be like, but we have not yet arrived at true humanness... perhaps only God is, as it were, really Human, and we are made in God's image and likeness—which is to say, we are capable of becoming more truly human

ourselves...Furthermore, we are incapable of becoming human by ourselves. We scarcely know what humanness is...God is the ultimate mystery, but to myself I am an even more impenetrable mystery. Who am I?...How can I find out, unless God reveals it to me? For who else could possibly know what is stored in the divine image inside me, except that One Who Is the divine image inside me?...When I work to become human, is it not God in me that is striving to become human?
(Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*)

1 John 3:2

²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed. What we do know is this: when the Humanchild is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Second Hymn: Love Divine All Loves Excelling, Green 150

Prayer:

O Come, O Come Emmanuel, we pray...O God Among Us, we are weary, our hearts are tired. We are human. We struggle, we forget, we lose our way, we we suffer and cause suffering. Sometimes we are so afraid. We have only our human-ness to offer you, O God. So please take this, take us, take our human-ness, all that we are, all that we are becoming, and make our weary hearts your birthplace. Be born in us, O God. You Who Know Us, You Who Know Us in Our Humanness, as we are. Come now and rest in us. Rest in us, that we may rest in You. O Come, O Come Emmanuel, we pray.

Third Hymn: This Little Light of Mine, Green 266

Message, Silent Worship

Fourth Hymn: Kum Bah Yah, Blue 52

Message

Once a week, my sons Cyrus, who is seven, and Caz, who just turned five, take the school bus home from school. Their school day ends at 2PM, and the bus usually drops them at the end of our driveway, where George is there to meet them, at about 2:40. I get out of work at 3, and I'm usually home about 3:40. The middle school and high school buses are usually doing their rounds as I get home, an hour after the elementary school buses. So on one such day recently, I came back through Brooktondale from Ithaca at about 3 forty five, and as I crossed the last intersection before our road, to the left, about 40 yards up the road was a schoolbus parked at an odd angle, out into the road, surrounded by several official looking vans, and a police car with its lights flashing. I thought, uh oh, there's trouble on the high school bus, and I pictured myself telling the boys and George when I walked in the door, "I saw a schoolbus and a police car with the lights flashing...I hope everyone is ok" and then I would hug them tight and be grateful that they were safe. I pictured all of that in a flash and then proceeded up our road, got to the end of our driveway, and there was George, still waiting for our boys. Immediately, with the most terrible sinking feeling, I knew that the bus down the hill with the police car was my boys' bus. OH NO. I said. GET IN. I said.

We drove back down the road, holding hands. I tried not to picture a man with a gun, or a child with a gun. I thought this could be it. This could be the moment when horror touches our family. Or it could be nothing. Sure. It could be nothing. A flat tire maybe.

My children are ok. The bus had hit a stop sign and shattered a window, and aside from one girl with a small cut from the broken glass, everyone was ok, Thank God. But what the Late Bus Shattered Window Incident did was remind me, with deep, rolling waves of adrenaline, how little it takes for me to be instantly and utterly afraid. It felt like Fear was part of my essence, and faith became a very unfancy, uncluttered, basic thing. Just my hand in George's and a mantra in my heart: Oh God, I love them. Please let everything be ok.

Because what is true is that sometimes everything is not ok. Sometimes the worst does happen. The horror comes to be visited upon us, or we visit it upon one

another, and the day is shattered like that bus window, only a whole lot worse. Even now, there are lives being shattered. It seems like it has always been so. We humans can be shattered and broken, or shatter and break each other, just going about our business. Fear can consume us, utterly, just like that.

That day what I felt most of all was very human. Which meant small and afraid, not in control, desperately hoping, sending out my love as if it were a lifebuoy, swimming in fear, in danger of brokenheartedness, unable to keep my dear ones safe. very, very human. One of the 7.3 Billion of us.

I confess that being human has at times over the last month felt unsafe and uncomfortable. I've struggled this month, Friends, with a particularly intense bout of the chronic insomnia that has plagued me for years. In the dark of the year and dark of the night I admit that I have been afraid. Awake in the wee hours again and again, it can feel as if the whole of the imponderable night crowds in, as if all the darkness everywhere, all the billions of miles of bleakest, lifeless space around our small planet presses in against me. As if our planet is imperiled and so am I.

Annie Dillard has written "I alternate between thinking of the planet as home - dear and familiar stone hearth and garden - and as a hard land of exile in which we are all sojourners." And it seems to me that many humans share her experience, alternating between being at home here, with our dear and familiar hearths and beloved people, where what and how and who we love defines ourselves and our days, and experiencing this existence on this lone habitable planet within a hundred billion galaxies as a hard and terrifying land of exile, a place where we can lose what we love, and fear rules.

Having a blessed homeland on the one hand and being in terrifying exile on the other is a truth about the human condition that runs through the stories of the Bible, from Exodus to the Christmas stories we find in the books of Matthew and Luke. In those familiar stories, Joseph and Mary are beholden to the power of the emperor, whose decree they must obey. They are among the powerless who must register for the purposes of those in power, and they must set out on a journey even though Mary is about to have a baby. And when they get to Bethlehem they find no welcome arms -- not yet. first they discover there is no room for them, no

haven. so they must search for a safe place for Mary to give birth, and a stable will have to do. Shortly after Jesus is born the family will flee to Egypt to escape Herod, mirroring the exodus of the Old Testament in reverse, but this time God's people are seeking safety in that land of exile. Herod's attempts to seek out and destroy Jesus, whom he understands to be a threat to his sovereignty, are truly horrifying and sorrow filled, as he orders all boys under two years old to be killed.

There is danger here in these stories, and cruel, barbaric power, and always the search for a place to be safe. There is a protectiveness toward this small Holy Being, God born among us, we humans whose lives are marked by this tension between estrangement and belonging, exile and return, love and fear.

Advent means, we know, A Coming, An Approach, An arrival. In our time, We too await and long for Emmanuel, That of God brought to birth to walk with us. The word Advent can also be translated as a verb: **To Come, To Approach, To Arrive.** And if we apply that verb from our direction, we are also arriving, approaching, coming closer. As God Approaches us, so we approach God. The stories tell us that we will arrive in the dark of night to find that the Holy One We Seek is Human, fragile, weak, like us, in danger, in need of a home and the kindness of strangers, vulnerable in the dark, mustering from within a light to show the way. The stories proclaim that the crossroads where we meet God is called Being Human, and suggest that, maybe God is awaiting the immanence of our own true humanity, just as we wait for God's inbreaking into our humanness.

Of all the miracles in the Christmas stories, what gives me the most hope, what I cling to in the darkness and fear, is the astonishing revelation that God-ness, Holiness, can be born in human-ness -- in vulnerability, in homelessness, amid the threat of violence, in poverty, where shattered lives happen, where fear resides, where we love other vulnerable humans, where babies are born helpless and completely, utterly lovable, and we give our hearts over to them, we know them to be beloved, we know them to be Children of God, and we watch them as they grow into the people they are becoming.

When I am afraid of the dark, it helps to know that the Holy dwells here too, that God knows love from the inside of the human experience, as both a parent and as a

child... that God can be born right here in the fearful dark on Earth, with us, the only 7.3 Billion humans around for a hundred billion galaxies. It helps to think that the Holy is newly born, again and again, being and becoming human.

²Beloved, we are God's children now; what we will be has not yet been revealed.

What we do know is this: when the Humanchild is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is.

Benediction

And here is our closing poem, an adaptation of Human Beings, by Adrian Mitchell.

*look at your hands
your beautiful useful hands
you're not an ape
you're not a parrot
you're not a slow loris
or a smart missile
you're human*

*not british
not american
not israeli
not palestinian
you're human*

*not catholic
not protestant
not muslim
not hindu
you're human*

*we all start human
we end up human
human first
human last
we're human
or we're nothing*

*nothing but bombs
and poison gas
nothing but guns
and torturers
nothing but slaves*

*of Greed and War
if we're not human*

*look at your body
with its amazing systems
of nerve-wires and blood canals
think about your mind
which can think about itself
and the whole universe
look at your face
which can freeze into horror
or melt into love
look at all that life
all that beauty
you're human
they are human
we are human
let's try to be human*