

A Sermon by the Reverend Elizabeth Bonforte Gardner
The First Sunday After Christmas (C)
Sunday, December 30, 2018

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 | Psalm 147
Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7 | John 1:1-18

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake, I will not rest.

Roller Coaster.

We can all just take a deep breath, hold it for a second and exhale.

I'm so grateful for this time – the time between the incarnation and the Epiphany.

A time to breathe and reflect and try to embrace the enormity of what God has done for us without the distractions of lights and presents and decorations.

This year, though, I am finding that the more I sit with this truth, the more lost I feel.

I've been in this place a couple of different times in my life...

You know what I'm talking about: where you don't know what you don't know.

I find it a very scary place to be.

I'll tell you how I got here:

One of my practices is to read and study theologians from different denominations.

I can't find a statistic that I can cite but I was told in seminary that only 11% of Episcopalians grew up in the Episcopal church.

I know the people I meet coming to Christ Church span the Christian spectrum.

So I spend a fair amount of time learning from non-Anglicans to keep current.

My go-to contemporary theologians are a Methodist from Kansas, a former Presbyterian from Canada, a Lutheran from Minnesota, and a former Baptist from Atlanta.

Recently, however, I've discovered a pair of Christians from Portland, Oregon.

They have videos and a podcast and, of course, a book – which Santa brought me for Christmas.

But all of this new learning in the past couple of months has made God more complex and complicated for me.

I'm understanding our Triune God in an entirely new way.

I'm learning why it was so earth-shattering for Jesus to call God "Abba" or father – and the long history in the Hebrew Scriptures that supports it.

I'm piecing together what John was trying to tell us when he wrote, "and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

I'm realizing what it means when Paul tells the church in Galatia they were protected by the Mosaic Law but now free under Christ.

But, at the same time, I'm totally lost.

The tidy categories I had are long gone.

It isn't like my world is turned upside down.

It is more like everything I had put neatly away is out and strewn all over the floor.

In my mind it looks something like a huge room in an old library where all the books are off the shelves, open on a long wooden table, with light streaming in through some very big windows.

And I'm sitting at the end of that long table with a blank yellow pad and a pen.

Everything I need is there.

But I don't really know where to start.

So I'm going to wrestle with God a little bit in the coming year.

And I invite you to join me.

I'm terrified and excited at the same time.

Terrified because I know this journey ahead of me will be filled with peaks and valleys and ups and downs and twists and turns.

Excited because I know when I come out of this, my faith will not be the same.

Because, well, it's complicated – just like any relationship.

Anything we think we know will always be limited because a Creator, by definition, is above and beyond that which is created.¹

But the Bible also describes God as seeking connection with creation – wanting a genuine partnership.

So trying to understand the relationship to this God is hard – then, add to that the fact that we are trying to understand God.

The God.

Our God.

To not just simply comprehend the idea of God.

¹ The Bible Project's "Who is the God of the Bible?"

Rather, we are being invited to know and be known and to participate in God's eternal love.

It's an invitation to know our Creator and discover why we exist in the universe.

And the answer, it turns out, is remarkably simple: Love.

We exist to be loved, just as Jesus was loved by his Father.

Just pause for a second and let that all sink in.

You can see why I anticipate a roller-coaster type of experience coming.

Which, as you can imagine, will not be easy.

It makes me a little scared.

Even disappointed.

But C.S. Lewis said, "I didn't go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of Port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don't recommend Christianity."²

The joy, I trust, will come not because we master or comprehend God's incarnation, but precisely that we cannot.

It means realizing that we do not need to argue the finer points of metaphysics or theological philosophy – which is best because when I do that I find it takes me away from faith.

No, instead we are going to allow the mystery itself to draw us in, going deeper while perhaps understanding less.

Letting go so that we can hold on.

It is going to get uncomfortable.

But we know we must embrace the difficult parts of the Christian life in order to grow and experience a gospel community.

At the very least, Jesus taught us that.

By leaving our safe places and entering into the challenges of our faith, we will be changed.

For the better, I think.

And while we won't accept simple Sunday School answers to our very real and complicated theological questions, we also won't put our faith on hold.

Being a contemporary Christian means receiving the grace God gives us but also sharing it with others.

Or, as St. John tells us in the Gospel lesson today, "we have all received, grace upon grace...grace and truth came through Jesus Christ."

² C.S. Lewis, "Answers to Questions on Christianity," *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970), 58.

So here we go.

Into a new year.

Into a new relationship with Christ.

Into a new understanding of what it means to be a disciple.

And yet, all the while using ancient texts to be better Christians in 2019.

I'm not sure I'm ready for the roller coaster ride that is to come.

But I pause for a moment, take that deep breath, and hold on tight.

Because this might be a wild ride.

For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest.