

Among Us, Unrecognized

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast

Olentangy Church

Columbus, Ohio

December 11, 2011

Scripture Readings

Isaiah 61

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Sermon

'Tis the season. The season for angels and shepherds. The season for mangers and infants. The season for wise men and for lights that shine like the star they followed. The season for all the characters and creatures – the donkey, the innkeeper, the hot-breathed cows – all the characters and creatures who appear, not in the Bible, but in our imaginations. 'Tis the season.

WHEN WE SEE IT ALL, our recognition is instant. We don't even have to think about it. We know what season it is. We know what's being celebrated. We know who to look for in the manger. And when our eyes fall upon him, we recognize the child.

If the displays on lawns and windowsills, on rooftops and tabletops, aren't enough, there's more. The Bible tells his story. Carols paint his portrait. Creeds define him. We know exactly who he is. A savior, born to us, Christ the Lord.

WE KNOW WHO HE IS, BUT in the beginning he was anonymous. Sure, the angels made their announcements. And a collection of unexpected visitors welcomed his birth. But after the flight into Egypt, he was unknown. He returned not to Bethlehem, but to Nazareth. He returned not as the Son of David or the Son of God, but as the son of Joseph, the son of a Galilean craftsman.

He grew up in Galilee unknown. And even when he took his place in the public eye, no one knew who he really was. *Isn't this the rabbi from Galilee? Isn't this the craftsman's son? Isn't this Mary's boy?*

There was more to Jesus than anyone imagined. Yes, he was a craftsman. Yes, he was a rabbi. Yes, he was a master to his disciples. And yes, he was rightly called the Messiah – even though no one who called him that knew what it really meant.

But his true glory remained hidden. It was covered up, cloaked in human flesh. After all, what does the incarnation mean except this? That Almighty God has come to hide among us as one of us. That God has come to be among us for a while to do what can be done for us in no other way, no other way except for God to put on a human disguise.

I READ A STORY THE OTHER DAY that went something like this. One day a handsome prince – princes are always handsome in these stories – one day a handsome prince was riding his Andalusian stallion through a field of ripe barley. His eyes fell upon a beautiful, young peasant girl – the women in these stories are always young and beautiful and are always called “girls” – the handsome prince’s eyes fell upon a beautiful, young peasant girl who was hard at work, gathering the barley. It took only a moment, and the prince was in love.

However, rather than tell her then and there that he loved her . . . Given his stature and his glory, that would have overwhelmed her in an instant. Rather than do that, the handsome prince went away. Then he returned to the field, dressed as a peasant, to work by her side and to make his love known to her in that way.

WE KNOW HOW THAT STORY is going to go, don’t we? At some point – and it’s really only a question of when – at some point, the handsome prince will set aside his peasant clothing and reveal himself to the beautiful, young girl, reveal himself in the purple and gold of royalty. The only question is, when will he do it? Will he do it as soon as their love is sure? Will he do it after she agrees to marry him? Will he do it just before their wedding? Or will he surprise her just after the wedding, telling her that he is a prince who will soon enough be king and that she will first be his princess and then his queen?

We know how these stories go. One way or another, the disguise will come off, the glory will shine, and they will live happily ever after!

SOMETIMES WE THINK OF JESUS this way. That the Son of God disguises himself in the humble clothing of human flesh. That the time will come when he will take off that humility and reveal himself in all his glory. And that we, the church of Jesus Christ, the bride of Christ, will be the queen of heaven.

But the Son of God is “Jesus” only in the humble clothing of human flesh. The Son of God was conceived and born in that flesh. The Son of God was put to death in that flesh. The Son of God was raised in that flesh. The Son of God ascended in that flesh.¹ And when the Son of God returns, he will return in the same flesh. Jesus is not in disguise when he takes on human flesh. Human is what Jesus is. What he is, what he will always be.

TODAY’S GOSPEL READING FINDS US once again at the Jordan River with John the Baptizer. Crowds of people have gone out to him. Priests and Levites and Pharisees have gone out to him, too. They have a question for him, a simple question. “Who are you?” they ask. Then they get more specific, tipping their hand, showing that they have

¹The Heidelberg Catechism says, “We have our own flesh in heaven” (Lord’s Day 18).

been listening to the speculations circulating about John, showing that they are not immune to messianic fever.

“Who are you?” they ask. And John knows that they’re wondering if he is the Messiah. John denies it. “Are you Elijah?” they ask. John denies that as well. “Are you the Prophet?” they ask. That, too, John denies. “Then who are you?” they ask, exasperated. They’re trying to fit John into one of the known categories. They have a report to prepare after all. Higher officials have delegated them to investigate. They have to know which box to check on the official report form. But John won’t cooperate. “I’m just a voice crying in the wilderness,” he tells them.

Then John tries to deflect their attention. He wants them to realize that they’re missing the point by focusing on him. There’s somebody else, somebody more important than John. About this other person, John says, “He is standing among you, unrecognized by you.” *He is standing among you, unrecognized by you. It’s as if you’re looking right at him, but looking right through him, not at all seeing who he is. Because he doesn’t look like what you would expect. Because your report form has no checkbox for him.*

THE PRINCE IN THE OLD STORY put on a disguise. But it’s hard to imagine peasant clothes and peasant ways fitting him very well. We know how those stories go. From time to time, he must have let little bits of his true identity slip. And he must have worried that the beautiful, young peasant girl would catch on.

But when the Son of God puts on human flesh, it’s no disguise. It’s no ill-fitting garment, with bits of purple peaking out from the sleeves or from the open collar. No, when the Son of God puts on human flesh, it fits him like his own skin. It is his own skin. And to look at him, you would never recognize him for who he is.

THINK ABOUT HOW THE STORY UNFOLDED. Towards the end, the people who condemned him dressed him up as a king. They put a phony royal robe on him. They put a reed-stalk scepter in his hand. And they crowned him with thorns. But no one thought for a moment that he was a king.

And when they nailed him to a cross, no one thought of him as anything remotely royal. The sign over his head said he was the king of the Jews. Nobody thought that was true for a minute. It was all mockery. It was all insult. It was all shame.

Truth be told, the sign was right. Truth be told, the cross was the royal throne of Jesus. Truth be told, right there on the cross he was revealed in all his glory: the glory of the One who battles against the powers, even the power of death, not the way kings usually do it, astride a charging Andalusian stallion; no, the glory of the One who defeats the powers, even the power of death, by suffering. That kind of behavior is uncharacteristic of a king. That kind of behavior makes someone unrecognizable as a king – at least as a king worthy of the title.

“He’s standing among you,” John says, “unrecognized by you.”

WE'RE IN THE MIDDLE OF the Advent season. It's the season of waiting. We wait for Christmas, when the Son of God came as the son of man. And we wait for him to come again.

Suppose he were to come tomorrow. Would we recognize him? Or would he stand among us, unknown to us? Suppose Jesus already has come back. Suppose he came back last week or last year. Suppose he has been among us since then. Could it be that we haven't recognized him? Could it be that we don't know what we're looking for?

I watched some of the movie *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* recently. There's a scene near the end where the bad guy needs to choose the chalice from the last supper, the holy grail. Out of a few dozen chalices, he has to choose the right one. With a little help, he winds up choosing an ornate chalice, the kind of chalice a king would use. He chose poorly. He didn't know what he was looking for. He didn't recognize the humble chalice of an Almighty King who didn't just dress up as humble, but truly became humble.

SO, WHERE IS JESUS NOW? Could he be standing among us? Is he here right now, and we fail to recognize him? Has he been here for years, and we've never seen him? Let me remind you of another story, a story that may be relevant.

All peoples are gathered together before a great king. Some of them are commended; some of them are condemned. The commended ones ask the king, "When did we see you hungry, and we fed you? When did we see you naked, and we clothed you? When did we see you sick and in prison, and we came to you?" And the king said to them, "Whatever you did for the least of my brothers and sisters, you did for me."

Then the condemned ones ask the king, "When did we see you hungry, and we didn't feed you? When did we see you naked, and we didn't clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison, and we didn't come to you?" And the king said to them, "Whatever you failed to do for the least, you failed to do for me."

'TIS THE SEASON. Fancy displays or simple, we know who the season is about. We know exactly who he is. We know who we're looking for. Or do we?