

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
December 24, 2021 Christmas Eve/Year C
Texts – Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

I woke up in the middle of the night a few years ago in a panic. I don't know what I might have been dreaming about, but I realized in that moment that I could not recall the sound of my mother's voice. My mother has been gone for almost twenty years now, and during those years I've taken some comfort in the ability to call up her voice at will in my memory. Suddenly, I had lost that ability. It was gone, maybe forever. I was upset.

Then, I remembered something – not my mother's voice, but something that might help me recover it. I have to go back almost sixty years, to the tiny ranch house my father built on Hobson Avenue in Saddle Brook, New Jersey. It was the afternoon of Christmas Day, 1962. I was three-years-old, and the house was bursting with excitement and activity. My three older siblings and I were on the ceiling with sugar-fired energy. The presents had long since been ripped open and the noise of kids playing with their new toys filled the room, backed by various adult conversations. My grandparents were there, Harriet and Herb. My aunt and uncle, Bernice and Jack, were there with my younger cousins, one just a newborn infant. My sister, Deb, pounded out short, staccato lines of Christmas carols on the piano. And my mother came in and out of the living room from the kitchen – in and out many times – as she kept an eye on the feast she was preparing while trying to manage the chaos in the living room, each entrance marked by an announcement of when dinner would be served, or a scold aimed at one of the kids to stop taking away someone else's toy, or a comment about the price of the roast, or a call for help in the kitchen.

Here's the thing. My father had purchased a Wollensak reel-to-reel tape recorder that year. And just before all the guests had arrived that Christmas afternoon, he placed it inconspicuously behind a chair in the living room, set the tape on a slow speed, and left it running for hours. The cacophony of sounds from that afternoon were all captured on tape – the children's laughter and tears, the bad jokes, the expressions of adult anxieties, and yes, my mother's voice.

A few years ago, after my moment of panic, I remembered that my brother years ago had taken that tape and transcribed it to a CD. I called him the next day and asked him to send me a copy, which I now have. I also uploaded it to the cloud, where it is now available to me even on my phone. Not that it's something I listen to a lot. In fact, I've only listened to it once. To be honest, it's very boring, even to me.

But that's the point. It's precisely the recording's specificity in time and place, its ordinariness, that makes it so rich: human voices rolling around the living room of the house at 502 Hobson Avenue in Saddle Brook, N.J. on Christmas Day in 1962. But not just any human voices. They were the particular voices of my life: my siblings, my grandparents, my aunt, uncle and cousins, my father, and yes, my mother.

God embraces that specificity. God embraces the intricacies of human life – of my life, of your life – all of it! God is bound up with all of us by design, by will, by love. Your life – your voice and the voices of those who love you. God is there. God is with us. That is the message of Christmas.

We sometimes refer to Christmas as the "Feast of the Incarnation." What does incarnation mean? Perhaps the most graphic way to describe it is to liken it to chili *con carne*: chili with meat. The Christian idea of incarnation is, quite simply, God with meat. *In carne* – God incarnate, God in the flesh. Real flesh! Skin and bones and muscle and blood and, yes, human voices.

Rachel Held Evans, in the recently and posthumously published *Wholehearted Faith*, puts it strikingly.

It is nearly impossible to believe: God shrinking down to the size of a zygote, implanted in the soft lining of a woman's womb. God growing fingers and toes. God kicking and hiccupping in utero. God inching down the birth canal and entering this world covered in blood, perhaps into the steady, waiting arms of a midwife. God crying out in hunger. God reaching for his mother's breasts. God totally relaxed, eyes closed, his chubby little arms raised over his head in a posture of complete trust. God resting in his mother's lap.

Yes. Nearly impossible to believe. And many sophisticated Christians don't really believe it. Paul Tillich, one of the great theologians of the 20th century, had a lot of trouble with this idea. Tillich tended to favor an idea of God as a purely Spiritual being, one who could never be confused with the stuff of our experience and this world. On several occasions he referred to the doctrine of the Incarnation as "The Anglican Heresy." Perhaps he was just squeamish about the birth process. In truth, the doctrine of the Incarnation is not Anglican heresy. It is Christian orthodoxy.

Tillich was not alone in his assessment of incarnation. The incarnation is one of those orthodox ideas which, when drawn out in all of its fullness, becomes radical and scandalous to us. Any time we resist thinking of Jesus as fully human, any time we deny Jesus a heart that feels the thrill of human joy or the weight of human dread, any time we deny Jesus the full spectrum of human desire, any time we deny Jesus the fear of his own death and the uncertainty of God's will, any time we deny Jesus a human voice – we are denying the incarnation. We are denying that God has chosen to extend Godself to us in this miraculous way.

Tonight we are proclaiming the scandalous Good News that God does not stand outside of human life, but rather continues to pour Godself directly into the particular, very specific stuff of this world and our lives. 502 Hobson Avenue. Christmas Day, 1962. Here. Now.

I can think of no better way to speak about this, about this incarnate God, than through a story of the birth of a baby. Imagine if that Wollensak recorded the sounds in a stable over 2000 years ago, in Bethlehem, in Judah. Imagine the sounds. A mother's cries of pain. An infant's desperate struggle to draw his first breath. A father asking what he can do to help while worrying about his family's future. And then perhaps a few quiet moments, a breeze blowing, the hushed voices of passersby, the soft conversation of a father and mother.

Given the messiness of birth, the messiness of life, it's no wonder that the primary symbol of this incarnate God is body and blood. The Eucharist is in part a recognition that God feeds us – every part of us – with the stuff of which we are made. And more than that – the Eucharist is the recognition that God feeds us with the stuff of which God in the person of Jesus Christ is made: body and blood and voice.

John puts it best in his gospel: The Word has become flesh and dwells among us. This is the Christmas message. It is the message at the very heart of who we are as Christians. We are people of the incarnation, of the God who is with us in body and blood and voice.

The story of Jesus' birth, the story we tell tonight, is the story of that God. May you hear God's voice in all that is your life, and never forget it, even when God seems far away. For God has drawn near to hear your voice, and will never forget it.