

**Fourth Sunday of Advent**  
**The Rev. Canon Charles Sacquety**  
*Rector Emeritus*

**12-24-06**

*Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7*

*Titus 2:11-14*

*Psalm 96: 1-3, 11-14*

*Luke 2: 1-20*

First, I would like to thank the clergy of St. Wilfrid's for inviting me to share this wonderful feast with you. It is truly an honor and privilege to be here with you.

Second, you probably aren't expecting a Jesus meek and mild sermon this evening. At least I hope not.

I would like to look at this important feast day as a time when God is revealing god's self, if you will. This feast is about the divine creator of the universe; a self-revelatory happening.

I would suggest to you that Christians have many gods. This is not to say that each Christian has many gods, but that we, as Christians, have many understandings of whom God is.

And Christmas should be a unifying occasion when we can come together and learn again the meaning of this special event. And, perhaps in doing so, we can come closer to the true identity of the creator and author of our being.

Let me take you back to a wedding anniversary I celebrated a few years ago. It was a very happy event. The bride could still get into her original wedding dress, maybe a few alterations, I don't know. I was standing on the patio have some champagne when a man came up to me and announced that he used to be an Episcopalian but now worshiped in a different tradition. He sincerely hoped that Jesus' second coming would not happen any time soon, because he wanted his daughter to be ready, to have received Jesus in her heart as her lord and savior. The clear implication was that his daughter didn't have a chance of living with God into eternity at this moment because she had not, as yet, accepted Jesus Christ.

Given this belief, what is God like for this man? And what kind of god does he ask others to have faith in?

I believe the Christmas story proclaims a different god.

You will remember the time when the aids epidemic broke out in the United States. It was found first of all in the gay men's community. There were numbers of clergy and laity who immediately declared that this was God's curse on gay men because they were an abomination to God. There was no mention of whom God was cursing with cancer or with heart disease. Just that aids was God at work in the world.

Given this belief, what is the nature of God to these people? What kind of god do they ask others to have faith in?

I believe the Christmas story proclaims a different god.

And take the extremely popular series of books *Left Behind* that came out just a couple of years ago. It was one of the hottest items in the Christian literature at that time. Thousands of people were reading it.

In general it talks about an event called The Rapture. It is a time when Jesus is to come to the earth and gather up all his believers and take them from the earth into heaven.

Literally, in a moment, people are to be lifted up from wherever they are and swept away into the heavenly realms. The books describe this happening.

So, if you are a plane pilot who is a true believer, you are taken from the cockpit and the plane and its passengers are left to fend for themselves. A surgeon in the midst of an operation suddenly disappears and the attendants and patient, if they are not true believers, are again left to fend for themselves. The driver of a car traveling down the freeway could be lifted up and the car becomes driverless in that moment.

Given this belief, what is the nature of God to those who wrote this series? What kind of god do they ask others to have faith in?

I believe the Christmas story proclaims a different god.

Some of you know that very early in my priesthood I was arrested in an act of civil disobedience. Oh no, you say. Yes, it really did happen. It was an ecumenical protest of the Detroit city council that has exercised eminent domain on property

of poor people in order to build an industrial park that brings in a lot more taxes. Clergy from many denominations were involved and one day while we were there someone started that popular civil rights song, 'We Shall Overcome'. There are many verses one can add and someone started a verse, 'God is on our side.' I was very proud of the Episcopal clergy present. Most of them stopped singing.

Does God take sides?

For whom did Jesus come into the world? Why will we talk about wise men after twelve days? Who are God's children?

What kind of god were we supposed to be singing about? What kind of god were we supposed to hold up.?

I believe the Christmas story has much to say about the very being of God.

So I hope I have shown you why I believe Christians have many different gods and proclaim many different gods to the world.

To a certain extent this is understandable. When three of the parishes of our diocese renounced their allegiance to our bishop there was a segment on the Lehrer news report about this occurrence. In that report a woman from one of these parishes declared emphatically that 'God is the same yesterday, today and forever.' Well, I certainly would not disagree with that. God doesn't change. But, friends, our understanding of God certainly does change. I am very hopeful that you don't still understand God the way you did when you first went to Sunday school, or when you read your first piece of Christian literature, or even a year ago. I hope you have grown in your understanding of God's identity and hope for the world.

I hope your concept of who your neighbor is has expanded. I hope your understanding of what it is to love has grown. I hope your vision of generosity has multiplied. All these things which are gifts of the changeless God should not become stagnant.

Thus, it is true that we have many understandings of the nature of God and that none of these understandings are complete. We should have some humility about our individual and collective knowledge of the almighty.

Yet, I believe we can say with some certainty that some understandings are not correct, do not reflect the holy, and are outside the realm of the Christmas story.

And we need to be ready, when someone talks about God in these ways to say that we know a different God; a God with unconditional love, with sacrificial love, with compassionate love. We know a god that is not the same as the god you are proclaiming. We know a god who at a moment in our history so loved us that the divine became human to live with us and communicate with us and show us how to have abundant life.

Now it seems to me that believing in such a god compels us into a different lifestyle. When we trust that God wants only the best for us, when the worse comes along, we look for the next door to open. Far from being discouraged we are a people of hope. Far from being bitter, we know that there is resurrection for this event as well. This belief changes the way we live. We live in trust or, some would say, we live in faith.

If I may borrow a parable Fr. Larry Hunter used some years ago. There was a farming community that was experiencing a horrific draught. There had been no rain for months. The crops were failing. The land was parched and the people were becoming desperate.

They went to their priest and asked that they have a special service to implore God to send rain. The priest was only too happy to oblige. The date and time were set. The church was packed. The priest entered and immediately became irate with the people. He said, you come asking God to send rain and not one of you brought an umbrella!

We are a people of expectation as the Israelites expected a messiah and God answered.

We are a people who can rest comfortably in the arms of our god knowing that God listens and responds. We are people who can risk being foolish for the gospel's sake and do outlandish things to build a kingdom on this earth that reflects the kingdom in heaven.

Because we believe in the Christmas story we change the world.

Our new presiding bishop in her installation sermon used the word *shalom* to describe who we are and where we are headed. She said: "This church has said that our larger vision will be framed and shaped in the coming years by the vision of shalom –

- a world where the hungry are fed
- the ill are healed

- the young educated
- women and men are treated equally,
- and where all have access to clean water and adequate sanitation.
- basic health care
- and the promise of development that does not endanger the rest of creation.”

There is obviously much to do to bring the Christmas story into our reality. To bring the god you and I know into the present time and space.

As we look at our own nation where this Christmas 35 million people don't have enough food and 12 million of them are children. Where applying for food stamps in Nebraska involves a 25 page application form and offices are only open during working hours when the working poor have to be at their jobs. Where the minimum wage is a joke if you look at the price of bread – we do not reflect the face of God given to us in this Christmas story.

Yet we are still a people of hope, but also of action. Do not let this Christmas feast hold only the image of a newborn baby in a stable. That is to obscure the meaning of this birth. Let this Christmas reflect the image of the god we know in ourselves. Let us be the incarnation of the divine presence in the world. Let us stand for, give for, do for, and act for the god who comes to us tonight.