



Grace Church

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Rector

GOD IS HIDING

Sermon for the First Sunday of Advent, November 30, 2014

Readings: Isaiah 64:1-9; Psalm 80; 1 Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37

Sermon text: But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

Isaiah 64:5

In the garden of Eden where the first humans lived, according to scripture (Genesis 2-13), God was right there with us; you could see him walking in the garden in the cool of the evening. The world was charged with mystery and wonder; God was vividly present. At the same time—call it the dawn of human awareness of God—we became aware of our freedom of choice, and therefore the presence of temptation. Adam and Eve demonstrated what predictably happens—humans will often make bad choices—when they chose to listen to the snake. Satan—as tradition identifies the talking snake—got into their heads when he appealed to their new and thrilling sense of freedom and power. They decided to eat a particular forbidden fruit. So much for the evening stroll together with God in the cool of the evening.

We have eaten the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Which has made us aware of a problem, but not yet able to solve it. The next story in the Bible illustrates that, as two brothers, Cain and Abel, got to fighting over land and whose way of life was better (one was a farmer, one a nomadic shepherd). God seemed to favor the offering of Abel. So Cain killed him with a rock to his head. Why are we humans so quick to fight, so slow to reconcile?

My older brother, a lawyer, and I got into an argument before the Thanksgiving meal over the grand jury decision not to indict the police officer Darren Wilson for killing Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri. He thought the decision prudent, in

light of a probable verdict of innocent, given the high bar to conviction for a police officer making judgments of threats and safety during a violent altercation. I argued that the prosecutor seemed to have biased the grand jury and thereby derailed the pursuit of justice. Officer Wilson's account, as reported in the aftermath, seemed to me highly implausible, but questioning seemed to frame all eyewitness accounts that differed from Wilson's as conflicting with the physical evidence and inconsistent. Well, no point in arguing with my brother on legal merits. The man is a pro.

But I think I was feeling just a small piece of the frustration and anger so many in the black community must feel over the endless series of shooting of young black men. Eric Garner in Staten Island and Tamir Rice in Cleveland, to name just two recent other examples, were killed by police officers who will probably escape any serious consequences, even though it seems clear there was no need to resort such quick and brutal measures. Garner was only selling cigarettes and was unarmed. Rice was only twelve and foolishly carried a toy gun to a playground. But he was shot within two seconds of the police arriving. Two seconds!

Each case has such particulars that it is easy to lose the pattern. But why is the situation so tense, the judgement so quick, the anger so evident, the polarization so deep among the communities? Why, after so many years, after the Civil War and the civil rights movement, after the election of a black president, are we still so divided by race? Why did Officer Wilson as he fired his last fatal shots see a demon, an inhuman monster, running toward him, sure he was going to be killed if he was reached, when others saw an unarmed and wounded young man trying to put his hands up or out, stumbling forward in surrender?

My friends, look at what happens when communities continue to divide and fight—look at Syria and Iraq. Violent and suicidal forces have been unleashed; hundreds of thousands of innocent people killed; millions displaced from their homes and seeking refuge in neighboring countries. I want to cry with the Psalmist: “O God, why have you hidden your face? Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence, so that the nations might quake at your presence!”

But, as the prophet Isaiah writes, “You were angry and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.”

So where is God hiding?

Last week we celebrated Christ the King Sunday. The reading was from Matthew 25, the story in which Jesus, now appearing in his true self as the Son of God on Judgment Day, judges people on whether they had mercy and compassion

on the poor, the sick, homeless, imprisoned, hungry—for it was Jesus who was with the least of these, who was the least of these, in that encounter.

That's the clue, isn't it? If we really believe that Jesus Christ is in each one of us—even the least and the criminal and the crazy; if every human is made in the image of God—as we read in Genesis 1; if all creation is given life through the Holy Spirit—and the Holy Spirit is in each us; then how can we demonize the other? How can we see anyone, no matter how poor or violent or mentally ill, as something less than fully human?

And yet isn't that what happened when Darren Wilson looked at Michael Brown and saw an inhuman monster, a cartoon villain, some sort of Hulk, charging at him? Sure Brown was a big man, but Wilson was 6'4" too. Yet at the moment he felt himself so overpowered, so small, that he just had to keep shooting.

All people are worthy of dignity and respect and just treatment under the law. We say so in our Baptismal Covenant as followers of Jesus; it is written in our Constitution and Declaration of Independence. All people are created equal, endowed by the Creator with inalienable rights. No human is inhuman—though some may act that way. No human is a demon or monster—though they may be possessed by demonic forces. People who act violently, who do evil, need to be restrained and punished; but they deserve justice not summary execution. People possessed by demonic spirits need exorcism and healing, not persecution, exile, or death.

And by people possessed by demonic forces I want to be clear: we have met the enemy and they is, to quote an old comic, us. I speak as a white person and I have to confess that we, as white people, need an exorcism from the demons of prejudice and blindness to white privilege. As science amply demonstrates, all humans share a common origin in Africa, and all are somewhere on a spectrum of skin color. But European and American history, especially colonialism and chattel slavery, has created these binary categories: black and white. And those who get counted as white get enormous and usually assumed and unconscious privileges; those counted black, quite the reverse. But we are all descendants of common ancestors, of Adam and Eve, to put it biblically, we are all made of one blood, as we say in our Great Thanksgiving prayer, we are all children of one God, we are all saved by one Lord.

So why aren't we sitting at the same table, sharing food, sharing a blessing, talking, making plans to work together? We should be. We are followers of Jesus, and he always seemed to have accepted the invitation to come to dinner. Now that didn't mean there weren't arguments around the table, or that the Pharisees weren't confronted with their mistakes and hypocrisies. Jesus could be a very difficult guest. But they sat down together, just as he sat with his disciples and said,

whenever you eat this bread and drink this wine, remember me—for I am with you in this bread and wine. Jesus not only in the marginal of our communities, but in our very food, at our tables. Hidden again!

That seems to be God's way with us humans. Perhaps God knows that if there is an ever-present thunder-wielding, lightning-throwing sort of God, yes, humans will behave well—as long as the enforcer is there. But God seems to be playing the longer and harder game of getting us to behave even when God is not there in an obvious way. Hmmm, like a parent. Just so, we are being called to grow up and behave from an interior sense of what is right and true and holy and good. We are being called to learn to see Christ in each other, to come together around shared goods, at shared meals and to say yes, Jesus is here. Jesus is always here with us—hidden it is true, for those without eyes to see. But we can learn to see with the eyes of faith, to hear with the ears of our heart.

I now invite us to turn in our hymnals to that great African-American hymn, “Let us break bread together on our knees,” and to get on our knees and sing.

In Christ's name, Amen.