

## Sermon for the First Sunday After Christmaas

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Oh, it's good to be home. I bring greetings from the far away land of Florida. Becca and her family send their love, and Lisa (her sister) sends her gratitude for our prayers these many long months. For what it's worth, Lisa's gotten some hopeful results lately, but we're trying to hold onto some caution a little while longer and not get too excited. Anyway, it was lovely to see them and get reminded what the sun feels like on bare skin. It's always weird to me to see Christmas trees in warm weather, and palm trees with ornaments just look wrong. Which is funny, because that's how half the geographical world experiences Christmas. When Christianity was born and grew into its own, all that happened in the Northern Hemisphere. So we see a lot of our calendar line up with the seasons, the seasons as they fall north of the Equator.

So, the light of the world arrives in the darkest time of year (and the darkness comprehended it not). We sing of bleak midwinters and snow falling on snow falling on more snow. Then night grows more present with Epiphany, Easter brings resurrection as flowers seemingly long dead sprout once again. And then our long green season lines up with the agricultural world, planting and waiting and growing and eventually harvesting, more or less, in time with the stories of the church. It's beautiful how all that lines up, isn't it?

Shoot, even our vestments reflect the Northern Hemisphere, especially the more northern bits of Europe. Take the double-breasted black cassock. As a single garment, it's got layers. It's black. In some places, it's fleece-lined. We've got the capa, a felted wool cape to keep the cold at bay. Layers pile on layers, and clergy in drafty old cathedrals stay toasty. The Canterbury Cap is also wool and some versions include cozy earflaps. There's even a particular skull cap called a zucchetto that, no joke, was developed to keep warm those holy bald spots.

But in the Southern hemisphere, it's the other way around. Christmas comes in the Summer, Easter in the Fall, the season of growth in the Winter. Now, granted, only about 10% of the global population lives in this other-way-around seasonal calendar, but still. It's not that unusual for folks to see the Star of Royal Beauty Bright shining through warm climes and long days. In some places, they've adapted those northernmost vestments to those warmer places. Black cassocks become white and single-layered. Clergy shirts are often linen and don't tuck in, and there's no felted wool in sight. And sometimes the other-way-around works pretty well. No felted wool, but as it turns out, for folks who raise sheep in the Southern Hemisphere, there's a connection we Northern Hemisphere folks don't get: Easter and Holy Week are right around the time when they shear their sheep. In the Church and in paddocks, Christ the Lamb is shorn of his raiment.

This stuff's fascinating to me. I spend so much of my time digging deeper and deeper into the pattern of our year while a whole chunk of the world does it completely different. I mean, sure, you don't have to go all the way to the Southern Hemisphere to find differences. Christmas in Arkansas is almost never white. Christmas in Florida served up seafood in place of ham. Ya know, some of the Orthodox get one Christmas celebration, but it's on January 6th, the Epiphany; other parts get two Christmases on January 6th and December 25th; and even others get kinda two-and-a-half Christmases with January 6th, December 25th, *and* December 6th (St. Nicholas' Day).

But no matter where you go, there'll be traditions that are unique to where you are. Even what kind of cookies you make change the world over. And I love that 'cause no matter where you go, where there are Christians, Christmas gets celebrated. And it gets celebrated in ways that are recognizable enough to feel the joy but different enough to be wonderfully special. Like when I was living in Thailand, I hosted a big Christmas bash at the Buddhist temple, and the local stores actually had these pre-made gift bags specially designed for monks with everything from new saffron robes to alms bowls. Think about that for a second. The local stores

made gift bags for the Buddhist monks...to get at Christmas! Even the secular world makes space for this thing we do, no matter how we do it. There are plenty of ways I don't love that secular Christmas stuff, but also, I can't help but get caught up in all the carols and the blinking lights and Santa and even Krampus. There's just so much to set this time of year apart.

Today's the Seventh Day of Christmas, by the way, and after a week of this brief season, I'm curious. See, we just spent a month of intense preparation and waiting, and the big day hit, and we had our blowout service, and then some silence, and life goes on. We've got twelve whole days to celebrate, but what do we do to mark this time now in the hopefully calmer days between the arrival of Christ and the arrival of the Magi? I'm not actually certain. I mean, there was a holy day nearly every day last week, like Dec. 26th was St. Stephen's Day, and usually Becca, Steve, and I get together for a big meal and a whole lot of nothing. This year, though, I spent most of St. Steven's day in the unenviable embrace of Delta Airlines. Tonight, we'll ring in the new year, or if you're like me, go to bed early and wake up in a new year. How do I mark the remaining week to come? Mostly by coming into work, updating spreadsheets to guide the year, and maybe remembering to stop and say my prayers if I'm lucky.

In the Episcopal Church in the United States, even way up here in the tundra (or what *should* be the tundra), right here, mostly our celebrations are marked by a quieter town with few students and mercifully silent nights. I haven't decided quite yet if I think that's exactly what we should be doing or if there's space for us to mark this time differently. It might just be that the most sacred thing we can do with this remaining week of Christmas is simply to be. It could be we're meant to carry over the occasional gallant nothingness of Advent, or it could be a pause to recognize the joys in our life, like what Christmas Eve was: the gifts of loving people, a chance to hug a loved one maybe for the last time, and a night to remember loved ones we hold no longer.

I don't know what we should be doing right now. Maybe there is no "should" this week. Maybe it is just a chance to be. I imagine Jesus and his family spending most of this week recovering from hard travel and the difficulties of childbirth. Maybe they're huddling close in the hay, or maybe someone saw their plight and gave up a room at the inn. Tomorrow, they'll make their way to the Temple where Simeon and the Prophet Anna will see the savior whom the Lord had prepared for all the world to see.

But today, we're simply here with a precious child and a quiet lull between big obligations and looming to-do lists. Maybe that's what we're supposed to get up to. Simply being here with that precious child, knowing what's to come, knowing what we'll need to do, and holding tight to the joyful innocence we so rarely see. The whole world over, we pause a little longer, stretch out the sacred another day more, mark each moment in our own ways. Because finally we're here, the light of the world held close and the promise and the work of a better world ahead. Merry Christmas, folks, it's good to be home.