

Sermon
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Amy Foster
December 18, 2016

Isaiah 7:10-16
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25

Prayer: Let us pray together on this fourth Sunday of Advent: "O come, O come, Immanuel."

Here we are on the fourth Sunday of Advent, on the brink of our celebration of Jesus' birth. Today we heard Matthew's simple version of that world-changing event, an account of Jesus' birth that connects him to Isaiah's ancient, hopeful prophecy pointing to the birth of a child who would be a sign of God's presence, who would be "Immanuel"—"God with us." For Matthew, and for us, Jesus is more than a sign, he is the embodiment of God. God came not simply as a spirit, but as a real, human person. As Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans, Jesus was not only the Son of God, he was also "descended from David according to the flesh"—a physical being with a family and a heritage. Jesus inhabited a body that walked, talked, touched, hungered, cried, slept, and suffered.

I have been thinking about "bodies" a lot lately. The way the body we are born into shapes our experience, for better or for worse. The way our bodies both serve us and betray us. I've been thinking about this because of the book that we have just finished reading and wrestling with in the Adult Forum. The book, titled *Between the World and Me* and written by Ta-Nehisi Coates, is presented in the form of a letter from the author--a black man--to his fifteen-year-old son. In it, Coates describes for his son the experience of growing up in West Baltimore, of attending Howard University, and of dealing with discrimination and fear because of his body. In the book, Coates also shares his deep grief and anger over the death of a brilliant, promising young black man who became another statistic in the long line of unarmed black men shot by police, and he expresses fear for his own son in the wake of the deaths of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, and so many more. For Coates, what stands between the world and him is his black body—a body he learns to love and celebrate, but a body that also places him—and his son—at risk.

One particular story that Coates tells in the book describes a day when he was just eleven years old and saw a boy pull out a gun in the parking lot of a 7-Eleven just after school had let out for the day. The boy did not shoot the gun, but the experience had a lasting effect on Coates. He reflects, "I remember being amazed that death could so easily rise up from the nothing of a boyish afternoon...I knew that West Baltimore, where I lived, that the north side of Philadelphia, where my cousins lived; that the South Side of Chicago, where friends of my father lived, comprised a world apart. Somewhere out there beyond the firmament, past the asteroid belt, there were other worlds where children did not regularly fear for their bodies."

For Coates, the fear for his body, for the body of his son, and for all bodies that are devalued in our communities, is a real, everyday experience. Some of us may have experienced something like this, but for others of us—perhaps most of us--this is an unfamiliar perspective.

Jesus himself was likely born into a dark-skinned, dark-haired body. I expect that in most ways Jesus' body looked a lot more like that of Ta-Nehisi Coates than mine. Jesus inhabited a body that probably was very much like most of those with whom he lived, but it was a body born into circumstances that made him vulnerable to the punishment of the Romans. He lived in an occupied land, and his message came as a threat to his occupiers and to those who colluded with them. As Christians, we believe that Jesus was much more than just a body, as are we. Jesus was the Word of God, the spirit of God, the love of God, but his body provided the means to put that love into action. Jesus did not discount the value of his body, even while he put it at risk; instead, he understood his own body as a worthy offering for us all—each week when we gather around the altar, we repeat his words, “This is my body, which was given for you.”

Our own bodies, too, are valuable and powerful gifts. Our bodies come in all shapes, sizes, colors, and conditions. Sometimes our bodies frustrate us, even seem to fail and betray us—there were probably times when Jesus felt this way, too. But our bodies are also amazing instruments that allow us to demonstrate and share the love of God, following the example of Jesus. Just as Jesus reached out to others with a gentle, healing touch, so can we. Just as Jesus used his voice to speak challenging words of truth and forgiveness and love, so can we. Just as Jesus walked with those who needed him, so can we. Just as Jesus used his entire being to help ease the suffering of others, so can we. Like Jesus, we can use the bodies, the brains, the voices God gave us to help make sure that black bodies, and refugee bodies, and gay bodies, and addicted bodies, and every body can live a life of dignity, in safety and free from fear and injustice.

Yes, we are more than just our bodies, and so was Jesus. He was and is “Immanuel” – God in our midst, God in our own experience. As we celebrate the birth of Christ, let us consider the profound message of the incarnation, of God taking on a body just like ours, and remember that our own bodies, as limited as they may be, are what God has given us to carry out God's mission of justice and love. “O come, O come, Immanuel” is our Advent plea; may the actions of our own bodies reflect the reality of “God with us” as we ourselves seek to embody the message and example of Jesus.