



ALL SAINTS CHURCH
PASADENA, CALIFORNIA

“The Blind Side Of Christmas”

A sermon preached by the Rev. Susan Russell
December 25, 2009 - Christmas Day

We made it! It is finally “Merry Christmas Day” -- the day we’ve prepared for, decorated for, waited for, budgeted for, organized for and dressed up for. It is the day we hear again the familiar words, sing the familiar songs and rest in the security of the familiar message: REJOICE! Look the baby is in the manger -- the Star is in the sky and the shepherds, the angels and all of us are all in place. Merry Christmas!

The challenge with all that beloved familiarity, of course, is that the Christmas story is SO familiar that it is possible to lose the amazing impact of its glorious message in the shopping-baking-decorating-festivating frenzy that surrounds the Christmas event.

Or maybe that’s just at our house. Because the truth is, we LOVE Christmas at our house. Between Louise and I we have a positively unseemly number of red-and-green plastic storage bins packed full of “signs of the season” we’ve collected over our collective many years of loving Christmas. And once they come down out of the attic, watch out! We don’t just deck the halls – we even deck the dogs. And we’d probably deck the cat, too, if she’d put up with it. (*Which she will not.*) From the stuffed Santa her Uncle Hal gave her when she as a girl to ornaments I’ve had since grade school to the iconic half-melted Santa Candle from my boys’ growing up years – there’s a place for everything and at my house everything is in its sentimental place on this Christmas-day-in-the-morning.

And it is precisely because I *am* so sentimental about Christmas that I am convinced it is so important on this Christmas morning that we take care to separate the sentimental from the sacred. It is important to make sure the signs meant to point us the eternal truths of the Christmas story do not become ends in themselves but serve instead as the icons of the incarnation they were intended to be. It’s not just important – it’s critical. Because as Rabbi Abraham Heschel famously said, “In every moment something sacred is at stake.”

Those words take on a renewed sense of urgency for me as we gather on this “O Holy Day.” Gather to claim a Christmas Truth greater than any of the traditions it inspires. Gather to wonder again at the power of a love great enough to triumph over death. Gather to celebrate the mystical longing of the creature for the creator -- the finite for the infinite -- the human for the divine – all wrapped up in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The stakes don't get much higher than the sacred at stake in the Christmas morning moment.

For the "something sacred" at stake this morning is nothing less than the promise born again this Christmas Day in the child who is the incarnation of peace, joy, compassion and justice. The hope of the ages for a world redeemed from sin, death, violence, hunger and hatred is here in our midst -- as vulnerable as a newborn baby. For that hope was born not once-and-for-all in a Bethlehem stable but is born again and again as we tell and re-tell the miracle of the Christmas story as a church that has brought that hope to birth year after year, Christmas after Christmas, for over two thousand years now.

You'd think we'd be a little closer by now. To the "Peace on Earth, Good Will to All" part. We've put a lot of choruses of "O come let us adore him" in the books down through the ages and yet that kingdom hasn't come on earth as it is in heaven. At least not the last time I checked the news. The Prince of Peace does not yet reign on earth as He does in heaven while troops are mobilizing for deployment in Afghanistan. The herald angels who sang "risen with healing in his wings" have not managed to bring healing to a health care system that fails again and again to meet the needs of the most vulnerable. And if you're following the situation in Uganda, then "you hear what I hear:" that the head of the Anglican Communion continues to sit in Lambeth Palace warm while gay and lesbian Ugandans shiver in the cold of dehumanizing homophobia.

And that's just the beginning of a LONG list of "somethings sacred" at stake on this Christmas morning moment as we gather to "O come let us adore him."

So my wondering on this Christmas morning 2009 is if it isn't time to find a new way to put some of that adoration into action. And I'm wondering if the church doesn't have something to learn about that from Sandra Bullock. Or at least from the character she plays in the now-playing film, "The Blind Side."

Before I go any further, I have to say no one is more surprised than I am that a feel-good-football-movie ended up in this Christmas Day sermon, but there it is. Life is full of surprises! If you haven't see the film, you've probably seen the previews of the true story of a fallen-through-the-cracks-of-the-foster-care-system kid named Michael who blossoms into a world class athlete because a pushy, feisty, no-nonsense woman reached out to him with what one reviewer called: "an authentic, compassionate response to vulnerability and need." And if that was the end of the story, then that would be a good story. It would be one of those feel-good, Hallmark-Hall-of-Fame kind of movie of the week along with dozens and dozens of others. And it wouldn't have ended up a Christmas sermon illustration this morning.

Because here's the thing. The "aha" moment for me came not in the reaching-out-to-the-kid in need part ... touching though that certainly was. It came – surprisingly to this fair-weather football fan – in a new understanding and appreciation for the role of the left tackle on the offensive line of a football team.

It turns out the job of that particular football player is a crucial one: to protect a right-handed quarterback from what he can't see coming. To protect his blind side. And it turns out that Michael was uniquely gifted with exactly what he needed to be an extraordinarily good left tackle. What it took to *connect* his gifts with the team's needs was his adopted mom – the Sandra Bullock character -- putting it all in context for him ... in one of the movie's great moments when she marches out into the middle of football practice and explains it to him like this:

This team is your family and you have to protect them ... Tony is your quarterback. You protect his blind side. When you look at him think of me. How you have my back.

And once Michael “got it” he never looked back. Once he “got” that his job was to protect that quarterback like he would a member of the family he loved, nothing got in his way. And the rest, as they say, is history.

Now here's where it gets weird. At least for me. All of a sudden – in the middle of a feel-good-football movie I hadn't planned to see much less like – in the words of a feisty, pushy woman challenging a left tackle to protect his quarterback -- I got this glimpse of a connection between Abraham Heschel, Sandra Bullock, the baby in the manger and the kingdom that hasn't come on earth as it is in heaven – yet.

And it looked like the something sacred that is at stake in every moment needing a left tackle standing ready to protect it – and it looked like a church that's still figuring out how to play that position.

It looked like the child who is the incarnation of peace, joy, compassion and justice looking to us ... to you, to me, to the church ... to not just “come and adore him” but to “go and protect his blind side” – to fend off all those things that line up ready to take down the good news of Christmas just like football players lined up on a football field are lined up itching to take down the quarterback.

And I imagined Sandra Bullock marching out into the middle of “the church” -- oh, let's just pick the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops as a place to start, shall we? -- and giving *them* a version of the same speech she gave Michael on the football field:

*This whole human race is your family and you have to protect them ...
all of them.*

And just imagine how the world might be a different place if the whole church finally “got it” in the way Michael finally did that **it** has – that **WE** have – been uniquely gifted with exactly what we need to do the work we have been given to do: *To bring good news to the poor; to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind; and to let the oppressed go free; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*

The stakes don't get much higher than that sacred work at stake in this Christmas morning moment.

And so, on this Christmas Day in the morning, I ask you to imagine with me where we might be on that “kingdom come continuum” if the church has spent the last two thousand years turning itself into an offensive line focused on protecting the blind side of the Gospel rather than into a defensive unit protecting its institutional authority.

Just imagine if everyone who had “come let us adore him’d” over the centuries had then gone out into the world and put as much energy into protecting the blind side of Christmas they had put into decorating for it. Or shopping for it. Or decking the halls for it.

Imagine if each and every one of US found our own place in that offensive line and poured as much of our energy, love, determination and tenacity into speaking up, reaching out, and protecting this WHOLE human family from violence, hunger and hatred.

I’ve been blessed to see glimpses of exactly that during this Advent season. In the over 1000 coats collected here at All Saints to protect those in our human family who shiver in the cold in Southern California. In the 5379 people who joined a Facebook group urging the Archbishop of Canterbury to speak up to protect those in our human family at risk in Uganda because of their sexual orientation.

In the ongoing determination of those who labor tirelessly to make a way of peace in a time of war – to bring healing to our health care system – to protect the last, the least and the lost who are the most vulnerable in these times of economic challenge.

“In every moment something sacred is at stake.” So let us give thanks that in this moment – in this Christmas day in the morning moment – as we celebrate together the promise born again in the child who is the incarnation of peace, joy, compassion and justice. And then let us turn our adoration into action as we go out into the world to protect the blind side of Christmas from all that the world will throw at it in the days and weeks and months to come – as we work together to realize that dream of Peace on Earth, Good will to all ... God’s kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven.

Merry Christmas! Alleluia. Amen.