

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer! Amen

In my experience, God worries first and foremost about our holiness and not our happiness. God does not spend a lot of energy propping up my ego, preferring instead to occasionally take me down a peg. I think many of you know that I serve as the head of school for Epiphany School, a really special Episcopal middle school nearby in Dorchester. I appreciate what a privilege it is being there. The work is very rewarding. I remember a particularly proud moment in the first year of the school. We were celebrating the school's first gala dinner, hosted by the Four Seasons Hotel downtown. All the children attended along with many of their parents and a constellation of the good and the great of Boston. The event was a smash. As the co-founder and head of school, I receive a standing ovation and was praised publically by senators and congressmen. I felt pretty good about myself later that night as I pulled into the parking lot of the parish of All Saints, Ashmont, where the school had its initial home, but when I opened the front door my heart sank. In the haste to get all the children into town, the parish hall had been left a disaster. All Saints charged Epiphany only one symbolic dollar in rent, but we were expected to leave the place spotless for Sunday. I couldn't leave it the way I found it. So I cleaned and cleaned until about 2:00 in the morning. Then, as I was getting ready to leave, I checked the dumpster. The good man who drove the truck that emptied our dumpster was very clear. If the lid wasn't closed down flush then he wouldn't pick it up. More than once, he'd proven he meant business and left us with a dumpster overflowing with trash. We couldn't just pile things sky high and expect him to deal with it. Sadly, that night the dumpster was stuffed. He wouldn't accept that, and if he didn't pick it up, then the church would have nowhere for its trash. I knew what had to be done. Dressed in my best suit, I climbed into the dumpster and began hopping up and down, up and down, packing it in, until POP. One of the bags burst. Down I sank. As garbage juice seeped into my nice new dress shoes, I looked up to heaven and said, "God, I hear you. Don't get above myself! Stay humble!"

Like me after my gala, so the Gospel story moves quickly past the Christmas euphoria. After all the Advent anticipation, the bliss of the birth pops out of sight revealing more about God's purpose. This child is not destined for happiness but for holiness. He will live as one of us and endure what we endure even unto death in his case a horrible death on the cross. Christmas Eve and yesterday, we heard how the Messiah, the eternal Word made incarnate in the Virgin Mary, came into the world with quiet grace, not with regal pomp but with just his mother and Joseph standing by. We see the scene almost silent, no crying he makes just the silent star and the gentle murmur of the animals. Acknowledged first by shepherds in the fields and then by magi from afar, the Messiah might seem to promise a bright and shining future, but then the rubber hits the road. In this sinful world will reject one who preaches Good News. The birth of Christ brings in its wake death and tragedy. The evil forces of the world lash out with violence and ruthless aggression. They recognize that this baby threatens their hold on power. Thwarted by the magi, Herod orders mass infanticide, the assassination of any child who could possibly be considered a fulfillment of this prophecy and threat to his legitimacy. The Holy Family, in straightened circumstances, flees to Egypt. The newborn king becomes immediately a refugee.

But, here is the good news. The story ends not in tragedy but in triumph. The story ends not with the cross but with the empty tomb, not Good Friday but Easter. The Messiah overcomes suffering and death, rendering the destroyer impotent. Think of Christ as a strong swimmer standing with us on a sinking ship. He swims ashore carrying a rope securing not only his position but also make rescue possible for all who will follow. Christ became what we are that he might bring us to be even what he is himself.

That work, the work of pulling ourselves along that rope to the safety, will not be easy. It will require honesty and a willingness not to resist the truth but to embrace it. That is not always easy. In sports, they say pain is weakness leaving the body. Well, spiritual pain may sometimes be sin leaving the soul. For example, when I started teaching, I worked for a Jesuit, Fr. Al Hicks. Al is, I think, as close to being a living saint as anyone I have ever known, and yet still entirely human. Though he has worked all over the world and earned several advanced degrees, he still has a hard South Boston accent. I can remember the sound of his voice when after the first month together he called me into his office. "John, you're a good kid. It's good to have you here." "Oh Fr. Hicks," I said, bowing and scraping for a compliment, "it's so good to hear you say that. I have not felt that confident in the classroom, but you think I'm doing a good job?" "Oh no," he said, "you're terrible. But you have got a good heart, and you'll get better, and it's good to have you here."

That might be what God is saying to all of us. We're terrible, but we have good in us. God loves having us here, and we can get better. Today, when we confess our sins to God, things done and left undone, let's all try to reflect more deeply, to listen more carefully to what God might be saying.

Years ago, I told that story of jumping up and down on the garbage in another sermon in another parish. Afterwards, changing out of my robes in a sacristy, I was laughing about how unsubtle God could be. I mean really "garbage juice" in my best shoes? Standing next me was an older lady from the altar guild quietly washing out the chalice and putting things away with the quiet air of someone quite familiar with the task. No doubt she had seen her fair share of priests and seen us all in action. "You know, Father, God might have tried to reach you before in more subtle ways, but you just weren't listening."

Friends, today's Gospel calls us to sober up from Christmas. The work before us is not to be fat and happy, but to be more holy, to draw nearer to God. You have got a good heart, and it's good to have you here. Amen.