

Homily – 4th Sunday of Advent

Rev. Ken Kaisch

December 24th 2023 – St. Barnabas Episcopal Church

Today is Christmas Eve, and Christmas starts today at sundown. And we all know what that means, don't we? It means presents! And that's important because today I have a very special Christmas present for each of you, and I'll give it to you towards the end of my sermon.

But first I want to tell you a story. This is a true story, and it's a difficult story for me to tell because there is so much pain in the story. But I want to assure you that the story has a glorious ending, so even if it's painful for you to hear, it turns out okay.

This is a story about a little girl who was eight years old. She lived with her family outside of London, England, and they had a happy life together. Warm, loving, caring – everything a family is supposed to be. And then, one day, in an instant, everything changed. You see, a plane crashed into the apartment building where her family lived, killing her mum and dad and her little brother. She was terribly injured in the fire that consumed her home and she almost died. She was in the hospital for over a year with surgery after surgery, skin graft after skin graft. And in the end, although her life was preserved, she lost everything that was important to her.

After the extended hospitalization, she moved in with her Grandfather – her only living relative. You would think that it would be wonderful to be with your grandpa, but he was almost completely deaf. So, she was terribly alone. Now nine years old and horribly scarred, she was living with an old man who could hardly hear. It would be more than I could bear, I think, to be so alone. To know that I would never feel my mommy's arms around me or my daddy's strength supporting me. So alone...

But this little girl was braver than I am and perhaps braver than you. She went back to school, but now with a terribly disfigured face and scarring down her body. The other kids made fun of her appearance. One day she was on her way to school, and two of the older boys said, "Oooo, she's so ugly!" They taunted her and called her Frankenstein. She didn't even know what that meant...

The little kids were afraid of her – like she was a monster or something. But she never gave up hope, figuring that God had spared her for some reason. She just didn't know the reason yet.

After high school she was accepted into college. Because she was a cheerful and gregarious young woman, she majored in business with a focus on hospitality. She dreamed of working in one of the big hotels in London. After graduation she went on numerous job interviews – one after another after another – but no job offers. Finally, one of the interviewers had pity on her and said, "You will never be able to get a job in a hotel with a face that looks like yours. You need to look elsewhere."

Brutally honest and utterly devastating! Her dream of serving others and helping them find happiness was dashed to pieces in an instant. She recognized the truth, and the recognition crushed her spirit. "What's the point," she asked herself. "Why go on living?" Over the course of the last 15 years, she had lost everything. She lost her loving family when she was just small. The plane crash had scarred her on the outside, and now, that scarring crept inside. She felt, for the first time, ugly, alone, and separated from everything that was good, everything that was joyful. By now, even her Grandfather had died. There was nothing left. Why go on?

She entered a period of terrible depression. There was no point in looking for work so she just laid in bed all day. She didn't even get up to eat. She thought to herself, "I'll just lay here and die. Nobody cares anyway."

Perhaps you have felt like this – separated from the liveliness flowing all around you. Living isolated, in a kind of empty bubble, all alone, no hope left. Nothing left.

Day and night, she lay in her bed. Everything felt empty. She was alone; she had no one who cared whether she lived or died, no one who loved her, no one who wanted to hold her. There was only this abyss of despair. She said that she could feel her spirit slipping away from her body...

In this moment of terrible darkness, lying alone in her bed, she felt a Presence and she saw a kind of glow through her closed eyes. "Odd," she thought, and she opened her eyes a little. There was a glowing light at the foot of her bed – a big glowing light. She opened her eyes further, and she saw a person standing within that glow. Her eyes opened further. "What is this? Who is here? How did you get in?"

And then the figure spoke. "I have always been with you – you have never been alone. I have always loved you. Before you were even born, I loved you. I will always be with you."

"Who are you?" she asked, her eyes wide open now, and sitting up in bed.

"Look inside yourself," He said. "You are always up in your head, thinking and trying to figure things out. I want you to feel the energy that surrounds your head – the energy that you mistake for yourself. Let that energy get heavy and sink down. Feel it as it moves through your neck... your shoulders... and let it come to rest... in your heart. This is where I have always been, in your heart. When your heart swells with love, my heart swells as well. This loving is our shared being."

"Who are you," she asked again? He responded, "You know who I am; you're just afraid to know that you know. Do not be afraid. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me." And then, of course, she knew...

This is the One who said, "I am in my Father, and my Father is in me. In the same way, I am in you and you are in me." This is the One, of whom St. Paul said, "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. Not life, not death. Not angels, not spirits. Not powers, nor principalities – nothing in heaven or earth can separate us."

And the One standing there went on to say, "I make my home in your heart. My home is in the hearts of all people – good, bad, Christian, Hindu – it doesn't matter to me. You are all my children, and I am with you, always." And as he spoke these words, she knew they were true. She could feel it – there in her heart – perhaps you can feel it too – that particular kind of resonance you feel when you know something is absolutely true.

As the glow faded, this young woman got up from her bed, left her despair behind, and stepped into a new and vibrant life. She knew she was no longer alone. No longer in despair, she was moved by this experience to become a motivational speaker. And that's how I heard her. She told me, as I am telling you, this true story.

And the gift – the gift that I promised you? The gift of that marvelous Presence – is knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ makes His home in *your* heart. More than just knowing – *experiencing* His loving Presence. Experiencing it now and always...

Perhaps you've wondered, "Where is Jesus in the midst of my crazy life?" Where is He when I'm alone? When I'm despairing? Our Lord dwells in the hearts of each of us. He lives in YOU, and always has and always will. And you can connect with Him, just by placing your attention into your heart – just like you are doing right now...

Remember this, especially when you feel alone, for it may be the best present you receive this Christmas...

This is what Christmas means. Christmas is when we celebrate the Incarnation of God. We celebrate baby Jesus coming to this earth but more than that – much more! We celebrate that our Lord is here with us, right now, and always.

MERRY CHRISTMAS!