Sermon for The Feast of Christ the King

Delivered at Christ Church Los Altos on Sunday, November 24, 2018

Text: Revelation 1:4b-8 and John 18:33-37

Title: The messy middle

There’s a scene in an animated film my children enjoy that depicts an iconic scene in Paris. A man and a woman are nuzzling one another, the Eifel Tower soaring behind them, as they pose for a goateed, glasses-wearing artist. The scene focuses first on the canvas, the couple appearing hazily in the background, and in the painting they are radiant. The sun is shining. Their hair is blowing in the wind. They are vibrant with youth and passion. Their eyes twinkle. Their smiles beam. They are the picture of health and happiness. And then the focus shifts to the actual couple, who look vaguely like the people in the painting but, you know, only vaguely. The colors of their clothing roughly correspond. Some of their features are similar. But in reality, the pair are a little rough around the edges. Their clothes are worn and faded. Their lopsided smiles reveal that neither has all their teeth. And they are generally older, shakier, and plumper than the painting would have you believe.

As we round the corner past Thanksgiving and into pre-Christmas mania, I think this scene says something about how we imagine the holidays and how we generally experience them. In case you haven’t heard, it is, officially, the most wonderful time of the year (though it’s been Christmas morning at Costco since a few weeks before Halloween). But then again, who am I kidding? Of course, you’ve heard! Every commercial, billboard, Google-advertising-driven ad popping up aside your search results and Facebook feed is surely announcing this good news. It’s time to celebrate! And, more importantly, to shop! You can’t go to the mall, stroll downtown, or stop by Peet’s and remain oblivious, as wreaths and Christmas lights abound and the flavors of pumpkin spice and peppermint appear in everything from your morning latte to your anytime ice cream.

Now, don’t get me wrong. This actually is, in my opinion, the most wonderful time of the year. I love fireplaces and hot chocolate. I completely geek out for Christmas music. There is already a wreath and tree out the entrance to the rectory. And I’ve been baking pumpkin bread since September and intend to continue well into February, thank you very much. Not to mention the unbelievably good news that us in December: that God loves us so much, is so committed to
our salvation, as to willingly take on flesh and come among us in the most vulnerable of forms, entirely aligned, entirely familiar with our vulnerability and the frailty of being human.

So, this is not a sermon about the evils of holiday creep. (Bring it on, Little Drummer Boy!) It is, instead, an invitation to remember what we are really celebrating at this time relative to how our culture depicts this season. Now, advertising is not intended to define our cultural norms. It is intended to incite in us an urgent, insatiable drive to purchase certain products, whether we need them or not, and at this it is incredibly effective. But advertising is so ubiquitous these days that we are steeping in it, and study after study reveals that, intended or not, these scenes shape much more than our tendencies as consumers: they shape our expectations of reality.

Which is part of why it is important to name that the holiday-themed commercials and shows and magazines ultimately imply that Christmas is but one more opportunity to perform, to perfect, to buy or make or plan our way to health and happiness and wholeness. If when we think of the holidays the image we have in mind is a Macy’s window display, or one of those commercials where impossibly beautiful people are exchanging luxury cars over their morning coffee, the reality of your slightly imperfect spouse, or slightly imperfect self, waking up on Christmas morning to your still slightly imperfect life might be a bit of a letdown, because we, of course, are always a little softer and rougher around the edges than the people featured in such scenes, even when we are the people in those scenes as they play out in our imaginations.

So it’s essential to remember, at the turning of the seasons, as we come to the end of what the Church calls Ordinary Time with today’s feast of Christ the King and look to the beginning of Advent next week, to pause and remember this critical truth: that God is less interested in our picture-perfect projections than in joining us in the complexity of our real lives. That God, the alpha and the omega, the beginning and the end, is also the God of the messy middle – of our messy middles. That God never has waited for us to get things just right to come among us. And that the coming of Christ does not depend on us finding the perfect gift, hosting the perfect party, creating the perfect moment, even saying the perfect prayer. God would rather be with us – here, now, in our perfectly imperfect lives – than anywhere else, and nothing we can do, buy, give or receive can change that. Thanks be to God, we’re just not that powerful.

After all, when we really think about it, those glossy magazine Christmas scenes, rooms so ornate and festive, well, they’re fun to look at but they’re no place to live. A real-life child, all
eager energy and enthusiasm, would take approximately five seconds to destroy the scene, ever so innocently, with peals of delight. And Christmas-y commercials, well, they never seem big enough to include the family member with late-stage Alzheimer’s, the sibling in chemo who is not having a good day, the autistic grandchild whose feelings refuse to cooperate because they are, well, feelings, or the depressed cousin who couldn’t even make it down the stairs. All these people never get a seat at the table. They remain behind the scenes, out of focus, blurred in the background. There’s never any room for them at the inn.

And those beautiful depictions of the holiday meal somehow never include the slightly racist comment from the brother in law you know would do anything for you but also just seems so angry; the sideways glances exchanged when the niece shows up with her first real girlfriend; the parent or child or friend who is three sheets to the wind well before five; or all the other tense, terrible, terrific truths that seem to come out when we gather together to ask the Lord’s blessing. Somehow, our ideas of perfection always end up skimming the surface of our real lives, lacking nuance, depth, complexity, tension – the exhausting and enlivening stuff of real lives and real loves. But God’s idea of perfection … well, it’s different. God doesn’t ignore the hard parts but embraces them, turns toward them, and ultimately transforms them.

Imagine this. This time, the scene starts in the background, the Christmas tree shining brightly, a warm glow in the fireplace, candles burning surrounded by greens along the beautifully decorated sideboard, as the family gathered at table slowly comes into view. And as it does there are two people arguing – something about climate change or the White House – and though they clearly disagree, they also respect each other, and from time to time they laugh, and they seem genuinely curious about where the other is coming from, like they could learn something important, something real, if they just hang in. And next to them is a mother comforting her crying daughter, who has had too much cake and company and needs to go to bed, like, an hour ago. And the scene pans out to include the teen in the living room, texting his friends, worrying about something he said to the girl he likes just before going on break, wondering if she feels the same, if she’s thinking of him. And it pans out further to include the girl down the street, who isn’t thinking of the boy, but is nervous about her fighting parents and obsessing over all the calories she just consumed. It pans out to include the couple next door saying the serenity prayer in the hallway; the husband who, in a moment of clarity, excused himself after their family toast to check in with his newly sober wife about how she is coping.
The scene pans further out to include those with no one to celebrate with, those on the streets and in the cold, too hopeless or high or hungry for most to notice.

And the good news in this is not that everything is made instantly right, not that we are able to fix all these flaws or heal all those hurts, but that God – the only one who really can – not only sees the whole wide scene but is drawing near. That God, source and sustainer, bringer of strength and solace, is not the least bit put off by our needs and our shortfalls and our shame, but is already on the way. God is coming, and calling each and every one of us to a feast more magnificent, more majestic, more miraculous that we could ever imagine. The Lexus commercials simply pale in comparison. The good news is that Christmas isn’t ultimately about what we do, plan, or give, but about what God is doing, planning, and the gift God already has in store for each of us.

If we believe this, if we long for that great gift, hunger for that gracious goodness, that peace which passes all understanding, we can prepare ourselves by doing precisely what God is doing: begin where we are, turning our attention toward the most vulnerable places and people around and within. Is there someone coming to your holiday party who struggles with food? Is never comfortable in his or her skin? You better believe the holidays are extra hard for them, and that a call or a kind word or a bit of compassion would be most appreciated. Is there someone in your circle who is just getting clean and sober? They are probably already working with their sponsor on how to get through the next few weeks, and letting them know you are an ally, a friend, someone willing to receive an awkward call at an odd hour could literally save their life. Is there someone you know who is going to have an empty seat at their table this year, someone sojourning in the wilderness of grief? Someone who might appreciate your acknowledging that pain, your curiosity, your companionship? Is there someone who just got divorced, lost a job, received a difficult diagnosis? Is there some part of yourself that could use a little tenderness, a little forgiveness, a little acceptance? Maybe even just a bit of rest?

This is the most wonderful time of the year, but not because we make it so. It is the most wonderful time of the year because God has already shown us, and promises to show us yet again, that we don’t need to hide from our darkness, even when we are stringing up the lights and stoking the fires. That our grief and sadness and loneliness and heartache are never stronger than the love that is coming into our world. It is the most wonderful time of the year, but it is also a
time when those feelings can be particularly fierce and frightening, when the gap between our fantasy and our reality can fill us with insecurity and deep longing.

So, this year, this season, keep that wider vision in mind. When you find yourself caught up in the consumer-driven cacophony, turn your attention to God’s dream instead. Or to your neighbor. Or to someone in need. Be kind. Reach out. Show up. Trusting that there is room enough at the table for all of us. That the chasm between where we are and where we long to be is precisely the crack through which God’s light will shine. Celebrating the great good news that God works our redemption out along the ragged edges, the raw emotions, the real encounters, with whipped cream and cinnamon on the side. It is, after all, the most wonderful time of the year. Amen.