

Sermon: November 27, 2011
First Sunday of Advent
The Rev. George Anastos

Isaiah 64:1-9

Wrestling

On Monday of this past week a church member sent to me the introduction of a book by theologian Walter Brueggemann. Whenever I come across Brueggemann, I know I'd better be sitting down. Brueggemann is one of that generation of new theologians that does not speak in pious platitudes but instead addresses how God, the true God, is one who tears open the heavens and comes down.

Hear the opening words to the introduction of this book:

The preacher in U.S. culture deals with a claim that is commonly accepted as the truth by the listeners. That is, we preach mostly to believers. There is a casual, indifferent readiness, even in our increasingly secularized society, to grant the main claims of the gospel -- not to grant them importance, but to accept them as premises of religious life. In fact, it is precisely the problem for the proclamation of the gospel that the great claims of the gospel do not seem to be problematic or in question.

The gospel is too readily heard and taken for granted, as though it contained no unsettling news and no unwelcome threat. What began as news in the gospel is easily assumed, slotted, and conveniently dismissed. We depart having heard, but without noticing the urge to transformation that is not readily compatible with our comfortable believing that asks little and receives less.

The gospel is thus a truth widely held, but a truth greatly reduced. It is a truth that has been flattened, trivialized, and rendered inane. Partly, the gospel is simply an old habit among us, neither valued nor questioned.

Neither valued nor questioned, an old habit. This tame God, this safe God, this domesticated God that we proclaim in our churches. As he says, when God is so safe, so tame, so domesticated, then there is no danger, no energy, no possibility, no opening for newness. It is true: the Church has domesticated God, tamed God, made God safe. We have put God in a little box; a god easily understood and which makes no demands on us. And on Sunday we can put on our best clothing and come to church and pay a visit to this aging, kindly god, and let the rest of our lives be shaped by what is going on outside these walls. We expect no danger from the pulpit, no newness from the hymns, no possibility for transformation in a god like that. It's a bit like, and if I offend you here, I'm sorry, but it's a bit like visiting a senile relative in a nursing home—going once a week, not expecting to hear anything of real importance, just a visit. No place we would ever think to turn to when life gets hard, nothing we expect to hear there that's going to knock our socks off and make us hear with new ears, see with new eyes, and understand with new hearts. We come to visit this goodly god once a week on Sunday.

How odd. Think for a second about the God Jesus preaches. Safe? Hardly. I'll tell you how God is not safe. July 22, 2011 – Anders Breivik, a young Norwegian man, set off a car bomb outside the government office buildings in Oslo and, while the police and EMT's were racing to that site, he then took a boat out to an island where a couple hundred youth were having a retreat. And he methodically and in a carefully planned way, shot them, one by one. Over eighty people died that day. Being in Europe at that time, it was fascinating listening to the coverage, and the coverage was just 24/7. The

lawyer who had been assigned by the courts to represent Mr. Breivik was clearly uncomfortable, and he kept looking down as the spotlights and cameras were on him, and he said, "I don't know how I'm going to defend him. I guess I just have to say he's insane." The commentators jumped on that. "Yes, he's insane." And it wasn't until three or four days later that another commentator said, "I don't think so, because if he's insane then every officer in every army in the history of the world is insane, because that's exactly what the military does. It carefully plans how to kill. It carefully chooses its weapons. It carefully organizes destruction." So then everyone agreed that Mr. Breivik was sane. Oh really?

I suggest to you the gospel is so dangerous that it says, "That's insane. You, who are created in the image of love, are designing weapons whose sole purpose is to put a bullet in the heart or the head of someone else and kill that person. That is a violation of the image of love in which you were created." The gospel asks us to consider (isn't this ironic?) the dangerous possibility that protection through violence is not safe. We now have the ability to destroy our earth hundreds of times over with the weapons we have. And we say we have those weapons to keep us safe. Excuse me? THAT is SAFE? It's not safe. So, might we take it seriously when the gospel says to us, "They shall beat their swords into plowshares, their spears into pruning hooks, nation shall not lift up sword against nation; neither shall they learn war any more." Or again, "And his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. And of God's realm and of peace there shall be no end." Or again, "Suddenly there was with the angels a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, goodwill to all.'" I suggest to you the gospel is not safe in a world so insane that it creates weapons of mass destruction and calls *them* security. I suggest to you that the gospel is not so domesticated as to let such insane logic pass.

And then there is the "domestic" god. People who are hired into another's home to clean it are called "domestic" help. The domestic's job is to keep things orderly and tidy and neat, to put everything exactly where it's supposed to be. We like that in our homes, in our lives, in our churches. A domestic god is a bit like a cosmic housekeeper who keeps our lives tidy. And we think it will keep us safe: good people are rewarded; go to church and God will bless you. Bunk. In 1985 there was a couple in the church I was serving in Salem, Massachusetts, and their baby died in childbirth. And as I met with them, I remember the father, David, saying over and over and over again, "It wasn't supposed to be this way. We did everything right. We waited to have a baby so we'd be financially secure. We waited so we'd be able to provide things. We've taken care of our bodies so that we know everything would go well. We go to church. We're good people. This isn't supposed to happen!"

No, it is not supposed to happen, not when we have a domesticated God, not when we have a theology that the Church has presented that says if you're a good person, good things will happen to you. If you're a bad person, bad things will happen to you. As Job tells us, that doesn't work. A domesticated God is so convenient when we visit that God on Sunday but so inadequate when life happens.

God is not safe. God is not domesticated. And God is not tame. There have been all sorts of news articles in the past week about "Black Friday." "Black Friday is starting early this year! Get out there and get your stuff!" It's interesting that we use the term "Black Friday," because it reminds us of the term "Black Tuesday" when everything crashed, when everything went wrong. One of the parts about the conversation going on around this is that we are given the opportunity to look inside ourselves and ask, "So, is this what Christmas is all about? Getting the best deal, buying, having more, acquiring?" And once you ask that question, watch out, because that not-tame God of the gospel that you hear every week, even if you only visit on Sunday, starts to worm its way into your mind, into your heart, starts to weave itself into the very fabric of your soul and say, "Yes, there's something more."

There's something that calls you out of what is tame into something that is wild, chaotic, something that gets you to question how much is enough, particularly when you have so much and so many people in the world have not enough. And once you begin to question the world's values, once you begin to listen instead to the Holy Spirit, watch out. You may never be the same.

This is the first Sunday of the year, Advent I, a time when we prepare in our hearts room for God, a time when we try to be vulnerable and open up on the inside for the incarnation of our God. And I tell you, "Watch out! That God is not safe, because like a potter, that God will reach inside you and shape you from within."

This past summer Eric and his potter wife Jessa preached a sermon together. As part of that sermon they actually made a pot and at some point Jessa reached inside and started to shape the pot from within. That's a bit what God is doing. When we call on God, God starts to begin to shape us from within, to mold us into the image of love. That same God, on this first Sunday in Advent is asking us to consider what it means to welcome the incarnation, to live that from within, and to start to express that in the world. It's not safe, it's not domestic, it's not tame. But for a people who have the courage to say, "This is more than a God we visit on a Sunday like an aged person in a nursing home, but rather a God we live with every day so that we live in church and go to the world, so that we can become a living expression of heaven's tearing open and coming down. We are part of the Holy Spirit in saying to the world, 'No. More organized ways of killing are insane. And no, an ordered world that feels so domestic that we are feeling safe when it's not safe is not sane. And yes. We're understanding that God being born into human form for human's sake knows what it means to live a human life, knows the tragedy of losing a child, knows the courage that it takes to live the gospel and stands beside us and walks with us in that way.'"

This is the God, the dangerous, wild God that we are awaiting to be born among us this Christmas season. So the next time someone says to you, "Merry Christmas," think about it. Just think about it. The Holy Spirit is blowing in our midst even now. Amen.