

Showing up

*Sermon preached by the Rev. William McD. Tully, Rector,
at the eleven o'clock service, December 18, 2011, the Fourth Sunday of Advent
Based on Luke 1:26-38.*

I've been cleaning out my office, the last physical act of ten months of transition. Buddy says he's not overly anxious about my getting out, but I wonder why someone came in the other day to measure the windows for new curtains?

In any case, I realized as I was digging through piles of things and files of things that I've occupied this space longer than any other in my life—longer than any house or apartment I've lived in, and the piles and files tell a story.

This sermon therefore will be a weaving together of some seasonal things—we're on the cusp of Christmas after all—and some lessons drawn from the archaeological dig of my office.

The theological hook that I'll hang this on is the notion of Incarnation. Volumes have been written, and arguments have led to bloodshed to assert and protect the idea that the Creator of the universe would and could take human flesh. It takes the Nicene Creed 133 words to say it, concentrating on this:

*he came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.*

I like the poetry of John 1 even better:

And the world became flesh, and dwelt among us.

What that means for us is that matter matters. You, your life and very flesh are where you can learn about God.

A certain kind of spirituality, and a certain kind of spiritual person is uncomfortable with this approach, and with the characterization of Christianity as “the world's most materialistic religion.”

That's William Temple's memorable line. He continues, “If we allow the spiritual and the physical to become separated, the unity of man's life is broken; the material world, with all man's economic activity becomes a happy hunting ground for uncurbed acquisitiveness and religion becomes a refined occupation for the leisure of the mystical. It is in the sacramental view of the universe, both of its material and of its spiritual elements, that there is given hope of making human both politics and economics and of making effectual both faith and love.” (*Nature, Man and God*, p. 478)

That's some theology.

And then we have the poetry of Mary, who showed up in history as the mother of God. That itself is beyond theology, not to mention biology. But a story like this preserves a profound truth: Jesus wasn't “spiritual,” he was *material*. We know God because God knows us in the flesh.

That's some theology, too.

I'm calling this fourth Advent sermon, *Showing up*. And I want to say it straight out. One claim I can make is that since 1994 I've been showing up. If you think about your life pattern, your commitments, I think you'll find that you show up for what you really care about.

Some things have gone well. Some things not so well. “I have left undone those things I ought to have done, and, yes, I have done some things I ought not to have done.

The human comedy is such is that my list of the latter and your list will not always agree.

Another distinguished theologian, Woody Allen, told *The Times* in 1977 that “Showing up is eighty percent of life”—a line so widely quoted that dozens of other people claim to have said it.

My profession—this ministry we share here at St. Bart's—is tangible work in the name of something invisible; something powerful but not universally seen or agreed upon. That's why showing up is so important. Believing in what you're doing and showing up to do it, time after time,

sermon after sermon, question after question, stewardship campaign after stewardship campaign, person after person is the *word made flesh*.

As I leafed through folders of the first years of sermons, letters, vestry minutes, and memos written on paper (remember those?), truth to tell I didn't remember or recognize some of it. But I was there. Many of you were here. We're still here. That's about 80% of the deal. "Keep on keeping on" was one of the most important things I was told by a mentor after I had poured out a series of hurts, disagreements and failures of my everyday ministry.

I expected him to offer sympathy, or solutions. All he said was: "Interesting. Just keep on keeping on."

A little higher up in my paleontological exploration upstairs last week, I came upon a file called New Millennium. It was filled with stories, anecdotes and predictions that I mined for sermons when everyone was consumed with what was coming. Some of the stuff was laughable: remember the Y2K scare. It had all the credibility of the WMD scare. Lesson not quite learned: we are suckers for predicted catastrophe.

In that file, I found the December 1999 issue of *Scientific American*. It contained a review of the 20th century's record of amazing discoveries, and some predictions for the 21st.

One scientist, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould was there, in excerpts from a lecture he gave at the University of Texas. Gould believed in evolution, but in a punctuated process. In his view, species were stable for millions of years and then changed, of necessity, relatively quickly.

Here are his 1999 predictions and my spin on them:

• ***We will be continually frustrated in our search for happiness.*** We will continue to grasp the things that give us pleasure and push away the things we don't like. Even if we map out our genes, we can't engineer this away. Even if we find a unified theory of matter, something deeper will matter to us. We can shop, but we'll inevitably drop. But we won't stop searching, a Biblical view if I've ever heard one.

• ***The search for meaning will continue.*** Every society we know of from history finds that after the search for power is exhausted, and after the search for wealth has gotten old, the hunger for meaning continues to drive it. We live in a time when there are far more choices for this search. The great living religions, and respectable systems of thought are known by us and open to us, in a way unknown to our ancestors. Christianity will continue to be one of those, but it will need to sharpen its identity if it wants to continue to offer the Good News: the eternal un-provable, that God loves us no matter what.

• ***And there will be a continuing tension between faith and doubt.*** Yes. I believe this tension is hard-wired into the human heart. When people show up here, as they do every single day, you hear the questions of seekers: "If God is good, if God is indeed God, then why do we suffer?" I want God, but I can't see God in the playing out of every event."

Looking back, showing up mattered, but it didn't take away the doubts. I had plenty. They sharpened my faith. I found that truth running through the rubble I saved and the rubble I threw away last week.

I wonder what you'll find if you decide to dig down, sort and clean up. Try it, even if you're not going anywhere. It may help you show up to your life all over again. Jesus showed up in the Incarnation.

And remember: You can't predict. You can't always solve. You can't always heal. You can't force other people to believe or do what's right, or even what's good for them.

But you can define and say who you are and what you believe. And you can show up.

©2011 St. Bartholomew's Church in The City of New York.

For information about St. Bartholomew's and its life of faith and mission at an important American crossroads, write us at central@stbarts.org, call 212/378-0222, or visit stbarts.org.
325 Park Avenue at 51st Street, New York, New York 10022.