

KGL+
Sermon
Trinity Church Boston
Year C, Advent 4
December 22, 2024

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together always be acceptable in your sight, O God our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

On this, the 4th Sunday of Advent, there is no better image than I can think of depicting the mystery of the incarnation than a trip to Market Basket.

Market Basket, for those of you who live predominantly in Boston or the metrowest suburbs where no Market Baskets are located, is a hundred year old supermarket originating in Lowell, Massachusetts, and began as a family store specializing in lamb—known as DeMoula’s. I won’t get into the gritty details of its history or politics (however, there is a documentary about it though!), but with 90 stores in New England, and known for ‘More For Ya Dollah’, it’s an establishment with a particular personality.¹

My experiences shopping at the Basket are sometimes banal, and but more often wonderfully bizarre. One morning, while standing in the produce section, a woman started telling me about her divorce. No, I did not have a collar on, nor had I asked or even looked up from the leeks I was inspecting. But somehow, at 7:30am on a Friday morning, there we were in the leafy greens section, digging into it. Another time, a woman stopped to tell me that there was fresh bread at the bakery—“It’s still warm!” she exclaimed, holding out a baguette for me to ostensibly touch for proof—gentle reader, I took her word without pawing at it, and, no—I was not in the bread department either.

It is the kind of place where whole families shop together, kids and carts askew. While I don’t typically start conversations with strangers in the aisles, I have—on several occasions—stopped other tall customers and asked them to reach items for me located on the top shelves, which they are always glad to do—some even looking around afterwards and offering to reach desired top shelf items for the rest of the shoppers in the aisle. It’s the kind of place where some customers might just be singing along to the Bangle’s Eternal Flame played over the speakers, and not only is that normal, it merits nods of recognition to one another as people pick up their eggs and juice.²

¹ Enjoy a brief history of Market Basket/ Demoulas here: <https://www.mashed.com/1133941/market-basket-the-story-behind-the-beloved-new-england-supermarket/>

² It’s so very singable: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PSoOFn3wQV4>

In a world where even kind and thoughtful and faithful humans enjoy their introversion and New England silence when out and about in public, Market Basket, for me, is a straight up morass of humanity. Carts are stopped at intersections as people have conversations, often completely oblivious to their impact on the flow of customers (which, honestly, is much like Massachusetts drivers). There is clearly zero assumed dress code, and more than often, if you are in line and realize that you've forgotten an item, the person in the line behind will 'hold your spot' gladly while you run through the store to get it. There's an entire Facebook page enthusiastically devoted to the 'People of Market Basket'.³

I'll use my 'I statements' here and say, on occasion, I think about how much I could get done in the world if it weren't for other people being people-y.

Perhaps you've had that thought one or two times on occasion as well. How humans being human seem to complicate so many things—that our own carefully crafted plans are foolproof with the exception of the presence of the rest of the actual world. Other people just tend to get in the way—even when it's in a good spirit and with good intention—but their, our, fallibility and distraction and competing goals usually provide stumbling blocks. I mean, sometimes you just want to pick up a carton of milk without admiring another person's baguette.

And yet, God descends into this morass of humanity. Clearly. Unapologetically. Lovingly.

Our scripture for today comes after Luke's Annunciation of Gabriel to Mary that she would bear the child of God. Hot on the heels of her consent, Mary makes her way to her older cousin Elizabeth's house, who is herself surprised to be pregnant, for an extended visit. When she arrives—recall that there are no text messages to give Elizabeth a heads up that Mary is on her way, or even an ETA—Elizabeth rejoices in Mary's news and offers her and her child a blessing: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb... For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Some historians have suggested that the writer of the Gospel of Luke was possibly female as there are more interactions among women in this gospel than any others—as clearly only women could possibly write about women. Even so, this pericope, this scene, clearly passes the Bechdel test⁴—a low film threshold, requiring two female characters to speak to each other about something other than a man—and yes, is an anomaly in scripture largely focused on the public lives of men.

³ I undersold this fact. There is a Facebook page for [People of Market Basket](#); a [page full of strange songs about Market Basket](#); [Business school papers](#) written about it; and [all the merchandise](#) you could only wear to certain events.

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/2023/04/05/1168116147/what-is-the-bechdel-test-a-shorthand-for-measuring-representation-in-movies>

It is also an anomaly in that the celebration of God's incarnation—the descent of God into humanity, becoming one with humanity—is only fully realized within a gathering of those very incarnate beings. Mary doesn't celebrate by herself. She doesn't imagine her experience of Gabriel to be largely a cognitive exercise, or a revelation personal only to her and her alone. While being unwed and pregnant in advance of an engagement was serious cause for concern, and her travel to Elizabeth might also be classified as 'escape', she does not celebrate the news of Gabriel until Elizabeth celebrates it with her. Their bodies, and the bodies they carry, defy a purely rational response.

The incarnation begins with an invitation to Mary, but isn't fully grasped until she brings it to another human—a human within her own strange circumstances (who wants to be the parent of John the Baptist, really?). Elizabeth celebrates and offers blessing not only to Mary, not only on the child in utero, but on the hope that she is holding on to—blessed is she who believed in impossible things. Blessed is your audacity, Mary. Blessed is your naivete. Blessed is your cluelessness into the realities of just how people-y people can be; how people-y they will be to your beloved child; to both Elizabeth and Mary's beloved children.

And even more—the Greek shifts Elizabeth's initial blessing from 'blessed are you' to 'blessed is she'—blessed is she who believed. Elizabeth, in her own pregnancy, in her own mess with her divinely muted husband, might just be including herself in this blessing. Might just be including us.

The incarnate God—the God who chooses to become human and live as and with and among humanity—is one who can only be fully appreciated, possibly only experienced, through the messiness of the incarnation itself—that is, real people being real people.

Imagine if people didn't get in the way of God's plan. Y'all, we'd be at the kingdom by now. But God chose differently. God saw Godself, differently. Our God is one who opted for the mess of fallible humans to welcome Jesus, and thereby transforms our mess into a means of grace.

Which is grace only if we will ourselves to see God's presence not in spite of the chaos and mess of humanity, but because of it.

It is magical thinking to believe that everyone is turned towards goodness and peace and patience and joy and hope in this one singular time frame each year—but it is incarnational belief to see that in all of the awkward interactions; in all the weirdness that humanity can present; in all of our dashed and negated efficiency and clarity by the people-y-ness of people; that even in these spaces, amid the tight aisles and long lists—that God comes into the places where people are brought together; where people celebrate one another; where people, each of us as unlikely as the next, can look at the ones who ask us to reach the top shelf, or hold our place in the check out line, and say to ourselves, 'blessed are they who believed that the impossible could happen'.

The mystery of Christ among us—Emmanuel with us—Jesus born here and now—is only real if we believe that the incarnation—the fleshiness of God—is real and found in every unexpected place. In every mall parking lot. In the corridors of the Capitol. In the predictability of every Lifetime Christmas movie, and in the aisles of supermarkets while shoppers (okay, I) hum off-tune along to Eternal Flame with more gusto than others might prefer.

Even there—especially there—God will be born. God will be present. God chooses, again and again, to be with us, as people-y people as we are. Let us make him room. Amen.