

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd

The Rev. Morgan S. Allen

December 4, 2011

II Advent, Mark 1:1-8

God our Father, you spoke to the prophets of old of a Savior who would bring peace. You helped them to spread the joyful message of his coming kingdom. Help us, as we prepare to celebrate his birth, to share with those around us the good news of your power and love. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

(“Transforming Worship,” the Church of England)

Fred Craddock, Jr, knelt at his sixty-three-year-old father’s bedside in a Memphis, Tennessee, VA hospital. For his part, Fred Craddock, Sr – alcoholic and esteemed storyteller of Humboldt, Tennessee – never stopped drinking and never stopped smoking Bull Durham cigars and lay dying of throat cancer. He weighed seventy-three pounds that day, and he could neither eat nor speak, but “when he saw his son, [Craddock, Sr,] picked up a Kleenex box and scribbled on it a line from Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: ‘In this harsh world, draw your breath in pain to tell my story.’

“‘What is your story, Daddy?’ [the young man asked his father.¹]”

During the Great Depression, the Craddock family lost the ten-acre farm they had inherited, and the family of seven moved into a dirt-floor shack with neither electricity nor running water. “At times, Craddock Sr. would sober up. He [would vow] never to drink again. He [would find] an odd job. Once, he...arranged for a dentist to pull a gold crown from one of his molars so he could buy Christmas toys for his children,” but as fine as he was with his words and with his stories (and perhaps even with his intentions), Mr. Craddock was as *unskilled* as a farmer, a handyman, and a shopkeep. Craddock, Jr, said of his daddy: “He wanted to do better by his family[, but he] didn’t know how.”

The matriarch of the Craddock family, Ethel Craddock, put food on her family’s table, working during the day in a factory where she adhered labels onto Buster Brown shoes, and, “at night, [gathering] her children around the fireplace to play word games,” in order to grow their vocabulary. Mrs. Craddock drew strength from her faith: “She took her children to church, sang hymns to the accompaniment of her harmonica, [and she] welcomed down-on-their-luck strangers who needed a hot meal or a place to stay.

“At first, Mr. Craddock shared the pew with his family...But he stopped attending as his drinking grew worse. ‘He felt guilty,’ the younger Craddock said of his father: ‘He’d say, ‘Every time I go to church, they preach against the drunks like they can’t go to heaven...I know what the church wants: another name, another pledge.’” Despite his father’s absence, Fred, Jr, found peace and acceptance in the church, where he was not known for his poverty, but for his potential. The church community cared for him as he grew up, giving him new shoes, picture books of the bible, and kindness.

And Fred Craddock’s father was not the only member of his family who could tell a good story. When Fred turned seventeen, he approached his mother to tell her that he thought God

¹ The story I quote throughout this sermon draws upon “A Preaching ‘Genius’ Faces His Toughest Convert,” a cnn.com profile story on Fred Craddock. For this article and more on Craddock, click [here](#).

might be calling him to be a preacher. His mother doubled-over, weeping at the news. When she collected herself, she explained her reaction, telling him of a terrible night when he was only eight-months-old. The infant Fred was suffering with “diphtheria, a highly infectious disease that forms blockages over the lungs, gradually suffocating its victims[, and he could] barely draw breath. His father [ran] a mile to summon a doctor[, but] the doctor [couldn’t] do much, and Craddock’s breathing [had] grown more labored. His mother [finally could not] watch him suffer any more, and [fled] to the barn where she [prayed] all night: “Dear God, if you will let him live, I will pray every day that he will serve you as a minister.” She fell asleep on the hay, and awakened to word that her son would live.

In stark contrast, when Craddock told his father of his decision, Craddock, Sr, cracked jokes: “Don’t be like John the Baptist...and lose your head.”

Perhaps the finest preacher of the last century, Fred Craddock knew at least two stories: one, of a world so harsh and hateful that it could turn a strong man and a father into a drunkard who could not provide for his family; and another, of a world so magical and good that a mother’s prayer could save a dirt-poor child from death and desolation and deliver him to bind up the broken-hearted.

We, too, of course, know these stories. We hear stories of this cruel world and its awful powers to coerce and to corrupt, even the people we admire. We know well of disease and disaster and disappointment, the unfairness of this life’s caprice, for those we love and even for ourselves. And yet in the face of such stories we announce: this is “The beginning of the good news...” *This is the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ!* For no matter how dark the world has become, we announce the good news that God loves us – loves you, loves me – loves us enough to send a son to choose a different life, sing a different song, and to tell a different tale. And when our infant child lays dying in his crib, it is the story of an infant king that we recount. And when our drunken father lays dying in a hospital bed, it is the story of a wild man pronouncing forgiveness at the riverside that we recall. And when the world has lost its mind and seeks its own destruction and ours, it is the story of a resurrected savior that we remember.

Fred Craddock’s father never heard his son preach. One Sunday while preaching at his boyhood church, a man the same age as his father approached him after the service and said, “[Boy,] you sound like your daddy.” Craddock had to compose himself in order to achieve the simple action of shaking the man’s hand, and he says that the compliment remains the greatest ever paid to him and to one of his sermons.

“‘What is your story, Daddy?’ [the young man asked.]

“His father’s eyes welled with tears[, and he] wrote: ‘I was wrong.’”

“‘It was so late,’ [Craddock said of his father’s confession.] ‘It was at the end. With his personality and his education – he was generous to a fault; give you the shirt off his back. He

could have been such a good person, helping people, talking to people, playing with children – he could do all these things.”

... “*he could have been...*”

In The Episcopal Church we have a tendency to receive sermons and admonitions of faithful urgency like we might receive flatulence in an elevator: such things may be necessary, healthy, and even good, but surely this is neither the time nor the place for such unpleasantness. This inclination to “politeness” functions as a strategy for avoiding some fundamental truths of this life: the first and most significant truth being the certainty that this life will end and, likewise, our opportunity for fidelity in this world will conclude. Our Advent preparation benefits from a measure of faithful urgency: looking forward to the birth of Jesus, so, too, do we remember his coming at the Fulfillment of Time, and, with a perspective of both the beginning and the end, we can acknowledge the worst of this life, and recommit to choose the Good.

I do not want to lie on my deathbed, grieving what I could have done and lamenting the man I could have been. I do not want my children gathered at the same, grieving the same, even with the affection children want for their fathers. No: I want to do the good I can do, while I have time to do it. I may not have everything, but I have something good to give. I may not be perfect, but I have good gifts to offer this broken world...all of us do.

People of God, do not wait until tomorrow: choose the Good today.

As we had opportunity last year, I invite you to participate in the Christmas Benevolence Program. Supported by your faithful Stewardship, Good Shepherd has received a dedicated gift of \$10,000, which allows us to share one hundred, one hundred dollar bills with members of our parish family, in order that you can share a bit of Christmas with an unsuspecting neighbor. This program intends to equip you to directly assist individuals and families who are in need: in need of a little something, in need of everything, or in need of anything in-between. Whether the gift be for utilities or food or a Christmas morning someone might not otherwise have enjoyed; whether the gift be to a person you know well, see occasionally in the store, or only met in the street, recommit to the Good. Announce that today “is the beginning of the *good* news.” Consider what a powerful opportunity this could be for your children or grandchildren, your nieces or nephews, to be given the capacity to respond, directly, to the needs that they see, and to see you do the same. Make known the nearness of Heaven’s Kingdom, that we would mean what we sing: *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.*