

The Very Rev. Cynthia Byers Walter

BEAR TO BEAR
Sermon for Advent 4A—Is 7:10-16, Mt 1:18-25
LPC, 12/22/13

Bear with me.

What does it mean to bear something? We use the word in the sense of tolerating or abiding or withstanding something: “I can’t bear this any longer!” We also use the word in the sense of carrying something: “Bear one another’s burdens.” Finally, we use the word “bear” to relate to childbirth. That is the sense that is used in today’s lesson from the book of the prophet Isaiah: “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” That is also the sense in which the word is used in the Gospel lesson from Matthew.

My question to you this morning, this last Sunday of Advent, one of our last opportunities to prepare room in our hearts for the newborn Christ is, “Can we bear to bear Jesus?”

This question, obviously, combines the first two definitions of the verb “to bear.” In other words, can we tolerate carrying Jesus? We clearly can’t bear Jesus in the same sense that Mary did, giving birth to him from our own bodies, but we can bear Jesus in the first two senses of the word: withstanding Jesus and carrying Jesus.

I know it’s just an accident of the English language, but think of this synonym “withstanding.” Can we stand with Jesus?

Can we stand with Jesus in the midst of what Christmas has become in the popular culture? Can we stand with Jesus in the midst of the noisy, glitzy, crowded and competitive Christmas of the marketplace? Can we stand with Jesus when even in the context of our own families Christmas morning’s emphasis is on giving and receiving material goods? Can we stand with Jesus when commercial interests tug at our heartstrings with sentimental songs, TV shows and Christmas cards, distracting us from the reality of God’s radical sacrifice in Jesus Christ?

Christians must make their own peace with the reality of a modern American Christmas. Unless you are willing, as are some people I know, to spend the entire month of December on retreat, you have to deal with our noisy and materialistic culture. However, in the midst of all that is gross and commercial and merely sentimental, there is always to be found some love, some true generosity, some beauty. The key is to stand with Jesus. Stand with Jesus in his humility, his self-sacrifice, his healing, his forgiveness, his love.

If this sounds like “keeping Christ in Christmas,” that’s exactly what I’m saying. However, allow me to point out that if keeping Christ in Christmas means griping every time someone wishes you, “Happy Holidays,” you’ve already let Christ out of Christmas. There’s nothing of Jesus in complaining when someone wishes you well. Standing with

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Jesus does not mean correcting people's preferred aphorisms. Standing with Jesus means being humble, self-sacrificing, healing, forgiving and loving.

Bearing Jesus for us means to stand with Jesus in humility, healing and loving.

Now let's discuss what it means to bear Jesus in the sense of carrying Jesus. St. Christopher is supposed to have carried Jesus literally. According to legend, Christopher's job was to carry people across a dangerous river. One day, a child asked to be carried across, but during the trip the child became so heavy, Christopher could hardly cope. Upon reaching the other side, the child revealed that Christopher had not only been carrying the whole world but the One who had made it. The name Christopher means "Christ-bearer."

Although this story has no historical foundation and St. Christopher has therefore been officially dropped from the calendar of saints, he continues to be venerated as the patron saint of travelers.

I am not sure what the legend of St. Christopher is supposed to prove, except that to truly carry Christ means not only to carry his cute little infant form, but to carry his cross as well. In other words, carrying Christ is not always such an easy thing to do.

Perhaps there is more truth in the popular Mary Stevenson poem *Footprints in the Sand*, where the narrator looks back on her whole life and sees it as a walk with Jesus along the beach. For much of the way, there are two sets of footprints, but sometimes there is only one. The person then says to Jesus, "These were the times of my life when I needed you the most. Where were you?" And the Lord replies, "Those are when I carried you."

So maybe carrying Jesus means to be aware always and have faith always that we ourselves are being carried by the Lord. In this way we can carry Christ to others, by living this faith. We also carry Christ to others when we do that healing, forgiving, feeding, loving thing I mentioned early. Bearing Christ for us means to carry Christ to others.

Thus we return to the final sense of bearing Jesus: of actually giving birth to him. No we can't do that as Mary did, but we can do that as Joseph did. Our story from Matthew tells us that Joseph decided to take Mary as his wife after all, as the angel directed, even though she was pregnant and he knew he wasn't the father. Bear in mind that in the practice of the day, to name a child meant to acknowledge the child publicly as his own. Joseph therefore, in obeying the angel and naming Jesus, made up his mind to carry Jesus as his own, even though Jesus had not been borne in or from his own body.

Jesus will not be borne from our own bodies in Mary's sense. But Jesus may be borne from us in Joseph's sense. If we can bear to bear Jesus... if we stand with Jesus in humility and love, if we bear Jesus to others like St. Christopher, if we, like Joseph, adopt Jesus as our own.