

The Reverend Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
December 24, 2016
Christmas Eve 4p and 11p

Welcome, friends, and Merry Christmas. I'm so glad you've chosen to observe Christmas at St. Mark's this evening. Welcome.

One of the strange truths about being a priest is that one suddenly has lots of friends who are also priests. In fact, on any given day, my Facebook feed is filled with priest-friends talking about sermon writing, hospital visits and the various frustrations and joys of serving a parish.

I'd say that my priest friends divide themselves pretty evenly into two camps: those who wear their clergy collars all the time and those who just wear them on Sundays and special occasions. I fall into the second category, though I'm no purist about it. It's not that I'm trying to hide the fact that I'm a priest; it simply doesn't occur to me to wear my clergy collar when I'm out and about town. Also, after the Christmas cookies and special dinners out, it's not a terribly comfortable fit right now.

Because I so seldom wear it, I tend to notice people's reactions on those rare times I do. For instance, last week, we had family in town for a holiday visit, and we all went to brunch after church. Since I was going directly from work, I had my collar on, and I noticed people reacting to me with nervous smiles or funny looks.

We ended up having breakfast at a place in Riverwest that was kind of cool. Certainly cooler than me. One woman in particular caught my eye. She had severe bangs, face tattoos and some impressive expanders in her ear lobes. She looked very different from most of the people I see every day. She sat, enjoying her coffee and talking with a friend, who was similarly adorned. It looked to me like they were trying to tell the world something through the art on their bodies. I was impressed and delighted at their willingness to express their views and creativity so forcefully.

And even as I sat there having breakfast just a few feet from these women, I noticed a few funny looks directed at my collar. One gentleman even looked somewhat hostile. What is this? A priest having breakfast? Are they allowed to do that? I wondered what people were thinking about me. About Christianity. I wondered how Christians are perceived in the world.

As I started to think more about it, I realized that this outward sign of my Christianity was a radical expression of a counter-cultural life in the same way as that young woman's face tattoos. I was telegraphing to the world that I believe that what happened in that humble stable so many years matters. I believe that God, out of God's deep love for us, decided to be born from a poor woman of no consequence, in a little town of no importance in the middle of the desert halfway around the world.

This may or may not be news to you at this point, but the culture is not as interested in this Christmas story as it used to be. Many of our friends and neighbors choose not to live a life of faith. More and more people find the church antiquated or irrelevant. Some folks might even think that Christians are fools. For us to be here tonight, bearing witness to this Christ Child is a way to push back against the dominant narratives in the world.

We look tonight into the manger and proclaim that hope is born into the world. That is pretty risky. Radical even. Sometimes the evidence of despair seems far too strong. How can we have hope when we see the suffering in Syria? How can we have hope when we live in a brutalizing political climate? How can we have hope when the woes of our city for the poor and the powerless seem to grow each year? That's what I am saying with my collar on. I'm saying that, yes, the seeming overwhelming evidence to the contrary, I have hope that the world can be different. I have hope because I know that God is with us. Immanuel.

As Christians, we say that this little baby is nothing less than the bridge between God and the world. We say that this little baby is hope Incarnate. We say that this little baby will grow up to say such sublime things that we can't help but repeat the story two thousand years later. Blessed are the poor. Love your neighbor as yourself. Harken the little children come unto me. Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you.

This Child will grow and teach us how to live. How to love one another. And that message is so dangerous that he will be punished for it—even to death.

So yes. I admire the woman in the coffee shop who has tattoos on her face and piercings in her ears. But she doesn't have anything on a Christian when it comes to being radical. We proclaim hope to a world in despair. We repeat the stories of Jesus to anyone who will listen. And in today's climate, that kind of hope ought to raise a few eyebrows.

Ring the church bells. Dust off your prayerbook. Get involved at church. Find that old cross that your grandmother gave you and wear it around your neck. Let the world know that you are a child of light. Let them know that you are a disciple of this little baby, born in Bethlehem. With our renewed commitment to this little baby, we can do anything. We believe that hope is real. That God is good. That love came down to earth at Christmas. As one of my priest friends says, "Don't over think it. I like the evening mass to be simple and the words uncluttered. It's about light and hope and God as a baby and that is amazing enough." My friends in Christ. My brothers and sisters in faith. Take this light and the promise of the Christ child out into the dark places of the world. Merry Christmas.