

BELIEVE!

The Rev. Mark Wilkinson, Rector
St. Aidan's Episcopal Church
Virginia Beach Va
www.aidanvbva.net
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Believe! Believe was on a banner over the cosmetics counter in a local department store in Milwaukee during the Christmas shopping season. My friend the Rev. Gary Manning, rector at Trinity Wauwatosa mentioned this in his sermon the Sunday after Christmas. Gary was my Greek tutor and a mentor to many of us when we were at seminary. He was a senior (and a classmate of Diane Carroll who was an assistant rector at St. Aidan's) and we try to attend his church when we are in Milwaukee.

Gary described the sign as written in a bright red font on a white banner. I am sure much thought and probably several focus groups looked at various fonts and colors to get just the effect the marketers wanted.

However, Gary pondered what sort of message this was. Believe? Believe in what? Believe in the power of cosmetics? Believe that if you make just the right purchase the love of your life will be thrilled. Let's not forget "every kiss begins with Kay." This posed a question for me that transfers to this week's gospel and our message of the 3 kings approaching the baby.

The magi, as is more accurate, come because they are wise men, who read in the sky that something special has happened in the next country. They travel to see what great act of God the star signals. They came without any preconceived notions about what they would find other than the star was the sign of the birth of a leader, probably a king. Regardless of the song we do not know how many kings there were, nor do we know their names until 500 years later when the Venerable Bede the early church historian declares that there were three and their names were Caspar, Balthazar and Melchior. We are not called to believe in the three kings or even to believe that they existed at all. I don't think it is really that important to believe in any of the details of the story we hear in Luke and Matthew, but we are called to a deep and crucial belief.

We as Christians have something absolutely radical to believe in. We are called to believe that God became man in a particular place and in a particular time. God chose to do this not because of Adam and Eve and the doctrine of original sin. That whole story was not part of the early church and was developed into accepted doctrine much later by St. Augustine. No the early church did not believe in original sin.

God did this incredible act because we could not see what was true about God. Richard Rohr said it very well this week. "We cannot *attain* the presence of God because we're *already in* the presence of God. What's absent is awareness."

The people of the first century had successfully put God in a box and called it Solomon's temple. They had this religion thing figured out. They knew what to do and when they did something that shouldn't they knew how to make things right with God by offering the right ritual of sacrifice. They didn't grasp what Fr. Rohr said in that quote.

God always has been and always will be with us, it is our challenge to become aware. That is in part what the incarnation was about. Emmanuel, God with us is the hymn we sing during Advent. This is what Jesus came to show us in the incarnation. Yes to reconcile God and man, but not by blood sacrifice but by incarnation. God is with us all the time we just need to pay attention. That is what a healthy prayer life helps us remember and experience.

I like many of you saw Star Wars over the break. I think this concept of God's presence is at the heart of the power of the Star Wars movies. Star Wars and the force strikes such a strong chord in our culture. We need to believe in something greater than us. A constant theme is the struggle of the Jedi to embrace the force, to let go of fear and let the power of the force flow. I wish we as a church could be as effective in marketing the presence of God in the world as Disney has been!

We also need to believe and remember that this is good news that we should not keep to ourselves, contained in these four walls. The third week of Advent, Wendy and I went to a gathering of the Tidewater tellers, the Biblical Story telling group that we are part of. One person told a wonderful story which I want to tell you this morning. I have shortened it a little, but here it is.

St. Paul's was a very large church with several services on Christmas Eve and two services on Christmas morning. The rector arrived Christmas morning already tired and walked through the church to get ready for yet two more services. Checking that the altar guild had everything in order he walked by the manger scene. Looking at the manger he realized that the figure of the baby Jesus was missing.

He first thought maybe the altar guild had put the baby back in the sacristy since at the Christmas Eve services there was a grand procession where the baby is placed in the manger, but they didn't do that on Christmas Day. Alas, no baby Jesus in the sacristy. Now fully awake and in panic mode he searched and searched but could not find the baby. The church began to fill up with people for the first service, but still no Jesus.

At the announcements the priest told about the missing Jesus and said if he was returned no questions would be asked. The second service then came and went and still no Jesus. As the priest was locking the door he saw a little boy with a brand new bright red wagon coming up the walk to the church. There in the wagon was the statue of Jesus carefully wrapped in a small blanket. The priest asked the little boy, "Where did you find Jesus we thought someone had stolen him."

The little boy replied, "Oh no father nobody stole him. I have been praying for weeks to Jesus that I would get a wagon for Christmas. I promised him if Santa brought it to me

he would be the first one to get a ride. I've taken him all over the neighborhood this morning showing him to everybody. I think he enjoyed getting outside of the church."

The little boy was onto something that the wise men understood. This was not an event to be kept quiet. We to have something to proclaim in large red letters to the world, Believe! Believe that God became human and dwelt among us. That God continues to be present with us no matter where we go or what we do. Believe that we have a message of hope and love in a world filled with pain and hate. Our work as believers in this Jesus movement begins not when we walk in these doors, but when we walk out of them.

The challenge is in a poem I found several years ago.
The Mood of Christmas by Howard Thurman

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock

The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
The feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among people,
To make music in the heart.

Among other things we are called to believe that we can make a difference.