

A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector,
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina,
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Mind the Gap

Some of us have had the privilege of visiting London, England; and no visit to London – or to any major city, for that matter – is quite complete without taking the Underground, the Tube. My last visit to London was in 1994. Bev and I were traveling around Britain, and we used mass transit almost exclusively to get around, and this was especially so while we were in London. We went from one end of the town to the other on the Tube. Yet, there was one memory of that traveling experience that particularly comes to mind and reminds me of tonight and our celebration of our Lord's birth.

What comes to mind is how as the train reached a station, the passengers would leave their seats and move toward the exiting doors. As the train stopped, the doors would open. Yet, before one could leave the train, a recorded voice would come over the public address system: "Mind the gap!" It struck us as thoroughly British – civil, thoughtful, orderly. Of course, the gap being referred to was the gap between the train floor and the station platform. I would say that it consists of about a six-inch space between the train and the platform, and I suppose that people have unwittingly stumbled in it from time to time and even injured themselves, hence, the warning.

Yet, whenever Bev and I heard this very British warning, we would look at each other and giggle. Being in a foreign land, making our way from stop to stop with nothing but a map and our gumption, like typical tourists we made our share of travel mistakes, getting lost, taking wrong turns, missing trains. So, whenever we heard the polite warning to "Mind the gap," we would always point to our brains and laugh. Our gap was about six inches wide, too, but it was usually between our ears.

"Mind the gap!" As I indicated at the outset, I think this little London Tube warning relates to the reason you and I are here tonight. As we celebrate the Nativity of our Lord, what is more commonly called "Christmas," it strikes me that, in a manner of speaking, this is precisely what God says through the Incarnation of his Son, Jesus, who is our Lord and Christ.

"Mind the gap!" It is as if God's voice speaks audibly in an attempt to get our attention to a problem. Contrary to the divine will, a gap has opened between ourselves and the One who has given us life. In strict theological terms, the gap is called "sin," but I hesitate to use that term because we have trivialized it to the point of total distortion. Yet, the actual point is, there is a gap between us and God; and it is not God's will to have such a breach in our relationship. And so it

is that I can imagine, in a kind of fanciful way, that on Christmas night -- if we listen to the angels' song and the shepherds' testimony, not to mention recognize the attentiveness of Mary and Joseph -- we can hear God's voice, saying: "Mind the gap!"

For on this night, God starts the ultimate process in which the Holy One takes care of the gap -- once and for all. The gap that separates us from our God and, therefore, from our truest selves, and tonight that separating gap is bridged by God's Christ. With the birth of Jesus, the gap between us and our God is closed. And this is God's doing.

"Mind the gap!" This night is all about our God. This night is all about what our God starts to do in fulfilling his will that the gap between God and us, the gap between one another, and the gap we experience within our own selves is finally spanned. The birth of Jesus, the recognition that he is the One who comes among us to change everything, that he is the One who not only bridges the gap but also conveys the very presence of God, himself -- this one is born in Bethlehem and stands at the heart of this night's meaning and joy.

"Mind the gap!" In a way, this phrase helps us understand what incarnation means. It assists us -- it reminds us -- of what and how Christmas conveys the stunningly good news of "Emmanuel": that is, "God is with us" ...minding the gap.

St. John's gospel begins with the profound declaration of Incarnation, when he says that "[i]n the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Finally, John the Evangelist trumpets the point, the one we have come to honor and mark tonight. John says: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father."

This is Incarnation. This is what Christmas brings and means and offers. "Emmanuel: God with us" -- in the flesh, not merely a good idea or a hopeful wish but God truly with us, completely on our terms, to "Mind the gap!" and to help us make our way back home to God.

"Mind the gap!"

Christmas is about our God and the reality of the Holy One's love for us and for his creation. "Emmanuel: God with us" is not just a poetic image; it is a physical reality. The birth of Jesus commences the ultimate demonstration of Who God is and What God is like. As our Eucharistic prayer for tonight puts it, "We acclaim you, holy Lord, glorious in power. Your mighty works reveal your wisdom and love. You formed us in your own image, giving the whole world into our care...When our disobedience took us far from you, you did not abandon us to the power of death. In your mercy you came to our help, so that in seeking you we might find you...Father, you loved the world so much that in the fullness of time

you sent your only Son to be our Savior. Incarnate by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, he lived as one of us, yet without sin.”

“Mind the gap!” God does, and Jesus is the proof.

In this vein, a story comes to mind about the daddy and his little girl and their bedtime experience.

There was this young family; a mommy, a daddy, and a four-year-old girl. The mother was out that night. So, it was the daddy’s time to put the child to bed. With great relish, the father got the little girl’s pajamas on, took her to the bathroom, helped her brush her teeth and wash her face, and then he tucked his daughter into bed. She picked out a bedtime story to read, which he did. Then it was time for prayers. They said them together, including all the “God blesses” of grandma’s and grandpa’s, aunts and uncles, friends, and pets.

After the prayers, the daddy leaned down and gave his daughter a goodnight kiss, told her that he loved her very much, and switched off the light and left the room. He returned to reading the newspaper, when he heard his daughter whimpering. He got up to check on her and stuck his head in the bedroom door. What’s wrong? he asked gently. “I’m scared,” she replied. “Oh, don’t be afraid. I’m right here. Now go to sleep.”

With that, the little girl settled down, and the father returned to his reading, but soon thereafter, the little girl cried out again, only this time with more intensity. It took some mature discipline for the father to remain in his chair. With the newspaper draped over his knees, he asked from the living room what the matter was. “I’m scared,” was the reply. Calmly and with a gentle tone to his voice, the father said, “that’s ok. God is with you.” To which the little girl replied with tears in her voice, “Well, I want someone with skin!”

Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. [Luke 2:10-11]

I hope that your Christmas celebration brings you the joy of being loved by family and friends. I hope that all your reunions convey sweet connections. I hope the good memories of Christmases past are relived in this year’s celebration. But mostly, I hope that you will give some honor and attention to what our God has done in the birth of Jesus.

“Mind the gap!”

“Emmanuel: God with us.” The divine Word, by which all creation was brought into being, becomes flesh. God on our terms -- so that we might see and touch and smell and taste and hear – and have -- life on God’s terms. “Mind the gap!”

Thanks be to God. Amen.

