



**SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE**  
**in the City of New York**  
*The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector*  
**[www.SaintThomasChurch.org](http://www.SaintThomasChurch.org)**

**Sunday, June 23, 2019**  
*The Feast of Corpus Christi*

*Solemn Eucharist*  
*at 11:00 a.m.*

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A Sermon by  
The Reverend Adam Spencer, *Associate for Pastoral Care*  
*on*  
1 Corinthians 11:23-26 and Luke 9:11-17  
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### **Lord of the Particular**

O magnum mysterium  
O great mystery,  
and wonderful sacrament,  
that animals should see the newborn Lord,  
lying in a manger!

Last week, travelling back to Ohio, I met my newborn niece. Lyanna Mae Spencer. She's tiny and she's perfect and beautiful and she smiles when she passes gas, like babies do. And she is one hundred percent who she is. She can't really express it yet. She can barely open and close her hands and she can't hold her head up at all. But she is who she is. It's a thing that my wife, Rose, who works with kids, reminds me of frequently. Kids aren't incomplete adults. They're unique people. Already. As Lyanna grows up, her mom and dad and all the rest of us are going to get to know who that person is. But she's unique right now. There's never been before and never will be again anyone just like this little, tiny, brand new human person.

Why tell you all of this? And why open up this sermon with the "Magnum Mysterium" - a Christmas text?

Today is our parish celebration of the feast of Corpus Christi. The day on which the church celebrates the Holy Eucharist. In the Eucharist, in Communion, we believe that we truly receive the Body and Blood of Jesus.

That He's there, present, in that wafer, in that sip of wine. That, like at Christmas, he comes down here among us.

It's always tempting to make God abstract. The God of moral law, the God of universal spirituality, the God of the philosophical system, the God of good feelings. The Sacraments, and in particular the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist can seem almost grotesque to minds that associate God primarily with ideas, theories, doctrines or moral laws or with a generalized sense of "the spiritual". Because here in the Sacraments, in the Eucharist, we do not find a God of cold, precise, philosophical logic or a God of warm, generally spiritual feelings. No, we find a God who assures us he is there, present, in that cardboard-like wafer, that sip of mediocre wine. Present not as an idea or a moral imperative or a feeling but as a PERSON. We meet Jesus there at that Communion rail. Actually meet HIM. Body, blood, soul, and divinity, as the old doctrine puts it. Ours is a God of the particular and the specific. Ours is a God who shows up.

God, the Christian tradition argues, showed up as Jesus of Nazareth: THIS human man, in this year, in this town, in this nation, under the heel of this empire. He had these parents. And these cousins. And these friends. And he lived this way and did these things and died on this cross and was buried in this tomb. It is not an Everyman story. It's not The Hero with a Thousand Faces. It is the revelation of the God of all Creation in this one, particular, specific human life. The only kind of human life there is.

"There are no general stories," writer and psychotherapist Amy Bloom says. "One doesn't hear general stories as a therapist. One hears unbelievably specific, intimate, detailed stories. There is no big picture. There is only this particular moment in this particular life."

And one of the many scandalous and strange things about the Christian God is that divine concern for and involvement in these particular moments of this particular, ordinary life of mine or yours. Your marriage or their divorce, my brother's new baby, my uncle's death, a friend's cancer diagnosis, her anxiety, his depression, their addiction, my bum knee.

According to the Book of Common Prayer, "The sacraments are outward and visible signs of inward and spiritual grace, given by Christ as sure and certain means by which we receive that grace." In the sacraments, in the Bread and Wine become Body and Blood, in the waters of baptism, the oil of confirmation and so on - we believe that God really and truly shows up to accompany us, to strengthen and sustain and sanctify us. To nourish us spiritually through physical things. Here and now, in the midst of our particular lives, our specific circumstances. In these particular and specific physical, ritual acts. God is present.

Because it is one thing to believe God is with you, it is another to consume him. It is one thing to believe God forgives us our sins. It is another to hear the priest say aloud the words of absolution, to tell you that you are forgiven. It is one thing to believe that an infant is loved by God, it is another thing to baptize them.

A few summers ago, I baptized a baby in the hospital. It was the middle of the night and she was a preemie - in a plastic crib in the Neo-natal Intensive Care Unit, covered with wires and tubes and surrounded by beeping monitors and machines. Her young parents were worried, with real medical cause I knew, she that their little one might die soon and so they wanted her to be baptized. They wanted, there in the middle of the night, unsure of the future, they wanted, they needed to know that their little daughter was loved and claimed and cared for by God. I entered the room covered in a gown and rubber gloves and a mask with booties on my feet. The baby girl's parents and nurses wore them as well. I poured a little bit of holy water in a seashell and poured it three times over her tiny head. Baptizing her in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. After the baptism, I gave the couple the seashell that I had used. Those parents, through this sacrament, had visible, visceral, tangible proof that God loved and accepted their baby girl. No matter what happened.

In the Sacraments we meet God in ways which we can experience with our senses. God responds to our all too real human hunger, our fleshly need for tangible expressions of the divine. God responds to this hunger, to this need with bread and wine made Body and Blood, and in sprinkles of water on a little baby girl's head as an expression of his everlasting love. God shows up in our midst so that we may meet grace face to face again and again.

The grace made particular in Holy Communion and in the other sacraments is offered us in the particularities of our days and weeks and years of life, as well. God comes to us in the daily things of our life. God shows up there too - in the restaurant and the park, in the boardroom and on the sidewalk, and in the loneliness of the empty room. Today's Gospel reading gives us just one of many, many stories of Jesus working his divinity in the stuff of our human existence by multiplying bread and fish. Staple foods. Ordinary stuff made extraordinary by his presence. Five thousand individual people from farms and towns and cities; Jesus met the hungry multitude where they were, in their hunger, and he fed them.

The feast of Corpus Christi has been celebrated since, at least, the 14th Century with processions - where the consecrated Communion Host was carried out of the church and into the city or town in a golden monstrance. In earlier centuries these processions included clergy, certainly, but also princes and magistrates as well as contingents made up of various merchants and craftsmen's guilds. Sailors and soldiers, cobblers and weavers, embroiders and bakers, bookbinders and blacksmiths. The Body of Christ in, at least some of it, its diversity and particularity. Following the Sacrament through the streets of the town.

It's a fantastic symbol of how God works. Moving among a throng of diverse individual lives, through the streets of the city. Or as a newborn in a manger, among the animals, on that first Christmas, or in the dusty hills and streets of ancient Palestine as a young man, living and dying, or on our altars under the appearance of bread and wine, and in us and in our lives. Here, where we are. God is Lord of the particular, King of the specific.

We must, of course, pay attention to see divinity and grace around us. In the circumstances of our lives. And here today upon this altar. Attention and devotion are linked; poet Mary Oliver reminds us. And so we keep coming back, day by day, week by week, in all seasons and states of our life to this altar. Bringing our hearts and all of their personal joys and sorrows to God and receiving in our souls and bodies this peculiar gift. God showing up among us, like my little niece, unique and whole.

In this Body. In this Blood.

O magnum mysterium  
O great mystery,  
and wonderful sacrament,  
that we here, such as we are, in all our painful and wondrous specificity,  
Receive you O Lord, as you truly are, in this bread, this wine.