

THE GIFT OF THE CHILD

December 24, 2007 – Christmas – Grace Church, Haddonfield

Rev. Dr. Patrick R. Close

CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, BORN WEAK & HELPLESS ...HAVE PITY ON OUR WEAKNESSES. CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, BORN OF LOVE & CHERISHED ...FORGIVE OUR LACK OF LOVE TOWARDS OTHERS & OURSELVES. CHILD OF BETHLEHEM, BORN PEACEFULLY IN A MANGER ...CALM OUR RESTLESSNESS & FEED OUR SOULS. GREAT SON OF GOD, MADE HUMAN, AS MARY DID FOR YOU AT YOUR BIRTH HOLD US IN YOUR STRONG, LOVING ARMS. AMEN

(Ray Chapman, “Stations of the Nativity”)

So many people think of Christmas as a child’s holiday. We buy presents for them; hold parties for them, put stockings out for them. Christmas is for kids, we hear over and over. But Christmas is meant for all people, especially for you and me. Christmas is a story about God’s special child, the Christ Child, Jesus. It is a child that is at the heart of the Biblical story and covenant!

Think about how often we hear about children. In the Garden of Eden, its Eve’s offspring who are foretold will crush the snake that deceived them. Abraham and Sarah are promised a child in their old age, in the midst of their barrenness. Isaiah speaks of a child who will be the wonderful counselor; the mighty god; the everlasting one; and the prince of peace. Luke, this night, tells us that a child is at the center of the Christmas story. Later, Jesus during his ministry we say to us that the way into the Kingdom of God is as a child (trusting, dependent, humble)!

And yet, for the people of Jesus’ day, children may have been a great blessing ... but they were at the bottom of the social rung. Parents had absolute control and power over their children, unlike today! In that past age, a child was powerless, dependent and subservient. All the same, Israel still looks for a child to sit on David’s throne. There is something ... hopeful ... about the presence of a child.

The miracle of Christmas is the gift of the child. It is at this moment of time and history that God chooses to become a human baby! Would this be the way we would choose to act? What would we do if we were God? Most likely, we would choose power and might, more so than love, to accomplish our will! That is what makes this night so different, and special ... that God comes in love, powerless, humble and weak.

The Incarnation we celebrate tonight is a shock! ... And a child shall lead them! The movie, “The Nativity” has been showing on television this past week. In one scene, Herod shares his fear with his counselors about the coming of the Messiah. He shudders to think that the ancient prophecies will be fulfilled ... and he ousted from power. Herod is looking for a military or political savior who will come with power to overthrow him. This is not the way that God works!

So what do we do about this night? What do we say? Rev. Herb O’Driscoll, who I studied with earlier this year, says, ... “Tell the story!” That’s what tonight is all about, telling and retelling the story! It’s a familiar story, and we love to hear it ... again and again. What does the story tell us? Think about a child ... when they come into our lives. Each child brings us hope for the future. But in the birth of Jesus, the child that comes will help us to realize a hope beyond our wildest dreams! What the Christ Child brings is an end to oppression, no more bondage, peace ... security ... safety ... love ... and more ...

The Christmas story is familiar, yet it bears looking at again. We hear this night that Mary and Joseph are traveling to Bethlehem. A curious thing begins to happen with us ... we tend to embellish the story ... add extra details that are not there! We know of Jesus’ humble beginnings ... and yet we forget that Mary and Joseph are peasants ... common people. We like to dress them up and make them appear richer than they ever were in life.

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How many of us have a donkey in our crèche set? How many of us picture Mary riding on a donkey to Bethlehem? Strange ... Luke's Gospel makes no mention of a donkey! There is no donkey in the story, but we like to add one. Mary and Joseph would have been too poor to own such an expensive beast. And the shepherds, how we love to present them in wonderful ways! Shepherds were the rascals, the outcasts and lowest of the low in Jesus' day. They took a job few people wanted.

The shepherds would have been more like what we experienced at the Christmas pageant at the earlier service ... rowdy, noisy, hard to contain, mischievous. Some of the "shepherds" brought crooks with them ... and they poked and prodded and threatened each other. Now, magnify this by many times and you will begin to see how the real shepherds were less than desirable. Remember this, it will be important a little later.

Then there were the angels! Oh, we love angels! We make them good luck tokens or our guardians. But in the Bible, the angels are the messengers of God! They come with the Word of God, and point us towards a new place in the scheme of things. They are more than the cute little decoration or ornament we place on the top of our trees. The angels come to announce and proclaim what God is doing. Remember this, it will be important a little later too!

Then there is the stable. We all have our neat, pretty little stables do we? They are perfect, usually wooden, and lovely settings for all the characters in our scene. But the stable was not what we quite imagine. It was a dirty, smelly place ... a barn! Anyone here ever work in a barn? I did! It's not the place I would choose to have a child come into the world. Then there was the manger ... do you know what it was? It was a feeding trough for animals!

What's amazing about this story is that it is into this mess that God chooses to come! Into the mess of our world and lives God comes! What kind of love is this? It's what Isaiah calls, "Emmanuel", God with us! God lives with us right here in the midst of our messy and dirty lives. A new kingdom has come, and all because of a child!

Jesus will say later that unless we change (and that's not easy for us to hear!) and become like children ... we won't be able to enter the Kingdom of God! We're not talking about being childish, throwing temper tantrums ... but a child that trusts, believes and relies on something or someone greater than himself or herself! The child we remember tonight is not about power ... or works ... or deeds ... or status ... or political affiliation ... or money ... or possessions. It's about being like the gift of the child that God gives and we celebrate this night.

We can't change the details to fit our own pictures of what we want God to be. I've been reading a small book this Advent by Ann Spangler, entitled, "Immanuel – Praying the Names of God through the Christmas Season." She mentions a story about one of our favorite Christmas hymns, "Silent Night." The words are so familiar! "Silent Night, holy night ... round yon virgin, mother and child ..." Ann goes on to speak of a Sunday school teacher who asked the children to draw their own nativity scenes. She looked at one done by a first grader. There was the stable, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, and a donkey ... but to the side was one little fat, round man. When she asked the boy who he was, he answered, "Why that's Round John Virgin!"

We tend to get the details wrong all the time. There was no donkey, there were no three kings, and there was a dirty stable with peasants and a child. It doesn't matter. What's important is there was someone there who was powerful ... a child, the Christ Child! God was there in the stable! Dr. William Willimon says that in

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Christmas, we see how God, out of love for us, becomes embodied in a human. Even though we keep moving farther and farther from God ... God keeps trying to come into our lives. That's what Christmas is about.

There's something else we need to think about when we talk of the child. We love Christmas, the story of the birth of a child, but he will grow into a man. Christmas is the beginning of the Christ story, not the end of it. One thing I do every year with my nativity set, and I don't think even my family has noticed, is that I place a cross on top of the stable. Overshadowing the birth of Jesus is his death ... and resurrection! We must remember the whole story of the child! Not just a piece of it!

What does the story tell us tonight? We hear Isaiah who says the birth of a child is the beginning of God reaching out to us in love! In the story, God seeks to lead us from the darkness to the light, in the hands of a child! The marvel of this night is we hear and see that God chooses to act in unexpected ways ... and that there is hope!

Luke's story of Christmas takes us to Bethlehem to see the king, the Messiah ... Jesus ... the Christ being born. Remember the angels? They come with the message of the good news! God has come! Remember the shepherds? These are the poorest, the least, the outcast and it is they who get the message first! It's not the rich, the famous or the politically and power to whom the message is announced ... it is to those on the margins of the world and life that hear and see first! Into the mess of life, God comes to be with us in love ... as one of us ... as a child!

The promise of the child is that life and love are God's ways! Jesus' very name means "He who saves!" Jesus comes to forgive us our sins, to free us from fear and death. A new life is held out to us! The other name of this season, "Emmanuel", reminds us of the function of Jesus ... a reminder that God is with us!

So, we tell the story once again. Our destination tonight is the stable. We are shepherds in search of good news ... and Bethlehem holds it out to us. Our calling is to be like the angels ... to announce and proclaim story! The Bible is a story ... our story ... the story of the past and the future ... it is others' stories as well. We are to share it with others!

On this Christmas Eve, the child leads us to new life, new hope and a new world. May we come to worship the Child. May we come to learn how to be like the Child. May we come to love as the Child. May we embrace the hope of this night! Merry Christmas!