

The Nativity of our Lord

Preached on Christmas Eve
Trinity Anglican Church, WRJ
Dec. 24, 2020
Text: John 1: 1-14

Today we are celebrating through lessons and beautiful carols the Incarnation of God through the birth of a baby boy named Jesus. In a year that has been beset with unanticipated challenges and the spread of a deadly virus, we, as Christians, still have so much to be thankful for. We possess the joy of those who know that the Creator of the universe, the One who supports our existence moment to moment, who is infinitely powerful and wise, *this* God desires to be known and loved by humanity—even *joined* to humanity. If that doesn't fill you with wonder and praise, with absolute amazement and gratefulness, it is difficult to know what would.

Our God is not a remote God who exists in undisturbed tranquility with no concern with the needs and suffering of humanity. He was unrelenting in His desire to form a people who would know Him and keep His ordinances, and so reach their true fulfillment. He tried to nurture a relationship with His people for hundreds and hundreds of years, often without much success. But He didn't give up; He didn't abandon them. He sent them prophet after prophet, trying to turn them away from their disobedience and futile strivings, and bring them back to Him. Furthermore, our God is One Who *speaks*, sometimes to people directly, but most often through Scripture and the lives of His saints. We don't have the excuse of the agnostic, that God is silent, and hence unknowable. No, we aren't left to guess about His character or what He desires of us. The question is not whether He speaks; it is whether we are listening.

And as our reading from Hebrews states, He has finally and definitively spoken to us

by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1: 1-3)

God has sent His only Son to live among us, to suffer and to laugh with us, to get His hands dirty and to have table fellowship with us, to join us in our sorrows and to celebrate with us in our triumphs. And just like the rest of us, He started out as a small, vulnerable baby, who could do nothing for himself. But we are celebrating His birth because through Him we hear the voice of God loud and clear, as if through a megaphone.

The Gospel of John offers us a profound explanation of who that boy was. He writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." We are told from the outset that Jesus was the

Word, the eternal Son present before Creation itself. Unlike the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke, John does not recount the story of the birth of Jesus. Instead, He draws our attention to the majesty of who Jesus is. Through John's account, it is clear that Jesus is the manifestation of God. He was with God and he was God. Jesus was sent to deliver a powerful message to God's people, yet he was a different kind of messenger. He is much more than a prophet and rules over the angels. The Word was God—and yet, people did not understand. He came into the world to become one of us and show us what reconciliation to the Father looks like. Ultimately, Jesus, the Light of the world, came to deliver his people from their futile schemes of self-justification and point them toward true salvation. But though the people were filled with expectation, they still didn't recognize Jesus when he appeared to them. They did not recognize the one who had been sent to deliver peace to a fractured world. They could not comprehend that this carpenter's son was the one "who taketh away the sins of the world." As St. John states:

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. (John 1:10-11)

Maybe this shouldn't surprise us. Then as now, we seem to need spectacle, pomp, and celebrity. We don't want to be reminded of our ordinariness and daily struggles. We want things to be glorious, rich, and exciting. We don't want to hear about poverty and hardship. We want a God Who will make all that go away with the snap of a finger. We don't want to think about the poor—that's depressing. We don't want a God Who gets down into the dirt and grime of human existence; that is not how we want to see ourselves. We certainly don't want a God who was judged, demeaned, and dismissed by the powerful, and later mocked, abused, and tortured to death. We want God to be strong man who will sweep away all the "bad people," not die for them.

But, again, we are celebrating the birth today of a baby born to a family of low income and status, who cannot even find an appropriate place to spend the night, to a young woman whose pregnancy was bound to have raised some eyebrows. We are celebrating a baby of humble birth, born in a barn, wrapped in a blanket, and laid in an animal trough. What a paradox!

God knew that the need of humanity was great, so He took the radical step of joining himself to us in the most intimate way possible. He chose to become vulnerable, to surrender His divine prerogatives and take on the burdens of a Galilean peasant in an occupied land. He was subject to all the trials, temptations, and indignities of everyone else, yet without responding sinfully. He did not come with the hope of being honored by the masses. Indeed, He did not come to be served, but to serve. He came to announce the Good News and to bring healing.

Just like in ancient times, this world is in need of healing. So many are feeling exhausted after a year of financial loss, insecurity, fractured relationships, mistrust, and disruption of normal life. Yet, the Word is still with us and the shining light of Christ can still be seen. God is calling all of us to take on the mantle of discipleship and serve the

world in the name of his loving Son. Christians who are outward-looking are needed now more than ever. We need to share the love of Christ with others who have been waiting a lifetime to hear the Good News. We need to come to the aid of those in need just as God has come to ours through His everlasting mercy.

In these tumultuous times, we find ourselves struggling with what it means to be God's shining light in the world. There is a strong desire among many Christians to hunker down and just play defense. This is understandable, but it cannot be the case that God wants Christians to hide their light under a bushel. What are we to do? Well, what would God do? He entered into the ordinary human world, and by doing so, declared it redeemable. *All* of it is redeemable, not just the parts we like. *All people* are redeemable, not just the ones who are nice and enjoyable to be around. There are many in great need whom we wish to avoid, who aren't that appealing, but who are still in God's image. We cannot truly be followers of Christ and ignore their suffering. Tomorrow when we shower our friends and loved ones with presents, what can we give to those with much less? How have we remembered the poor and the suffering? God gave us the greatest gift imaginable, and He wants us to pay it forward.

COVID has created financial hardship for millions in this country. There is a tremendous fear that many will be left homeless in the aftermath of this global pandemic. As we remember the incredible gift of God's Son taking on our humanity, let us be reminded of the grace that we have received. The wise men brought Jesus gifts suitable for a king. What shall we bring Him? Our gift to God is our love for Him, and following from that, our love for those in His image. Because God has united himself to us through his Son, we can now "put on the Lord Jesus" and be conduits of God's grace to our neighbors, near and far. During Jesus' physical time on earth, He showed us what the love of God really looks like. He did not spend time dining with nobility, despite his divine status. He was never to be crowned an earthly king, which was very confounding to the people of his day. He instead dined with the marginalized and the outcasts. It is God's hope that His Church will care for "the least of these", not just turn in upon itself.

This is indeed a time to celebrate with festivities to whatever extent we deem appropriate. We give thanks for those who gather with us and those whom the Lord has received into eternity. Make it a joyous occasion. The God of Creation desires us to live in full the joy that this wonderful season represents. It is possible to live in a way pleasing to God because of what His Son has done. Let us strive, in our own small way, to bear witness to the Light that humans so desperately yearn for.

In the Name...