

Christmas Eve, year C December 24, 2006 Cathedral Church of St. Paul

This is a magical night filling us with images that reach the deepest parts of our souls. It is the night of the greatest Good News that has ever been heard. It is a night of hope. Is any story about Jesus dearer to our hearts than the Christmas story? No doubt each of us has our personal favorite. And, of course, everyone loves the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection. But the Christmas story touches a place in many of us that is rarely opened.

Somehow, at Christmas time it's all right to be a child again, kneeling in wonder before the mystery of the manger. It's all right to be amazed at an indescribable star, at angels in the sky, at kings worshipping a newborn baby. It is comforting to imagine ourselves in the warm light of

a stable, marveling at this little child. At the crib we can forget for a moment the complexities and the anxieties of our lives.

Perhaps its childlike quality is what draws us to the Christmas story. And just maybe—that's partly what God intended the accounts of Jesus' birth to do. Precisely because the Christmas story touches a simpler place within us, God may act within us at this season in a purer way than at times when we are not so open, so simple.

Still, a childlike opening to wonder is not all that is intended by the Gospel stories of Jesus' birth. In reality, if all we knew about Jesus was what we learned in the birth stories, and if we knew how to read them for every single implication, we could experience a summary of the Good

News. This, too, is the purpose of these stories: they not only open us to a quiet space of soul, they fill that space with truth.

Perhaps because of the very simplicity inspired in our hearts by the Christmas story, many people are put off by attempts to study it. Scholarly analysis could distance us from the Lord instead of drawing us nearer at Christmas.

On the contrary all of Scripture offers many levels of meaning. If we approach the Christmas story with open hearts and attentive minds, it will become deeper, stronger, and lovelier than it has ever been before. We will lose nothing from pondering the results of scholarship. We can still approach the manger like a child. We can still love the angels and the

magi and the star and all the rest precisely because they will mediate more of truth, more of love, than they did before.

What are some of the deeper meanings, the symbolism of this story? The Midrash is the Jewish rabbi's commentary on the Old Testament. In it, there is a dialogue between Adam and God following Adam and Eve's expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Adam asks: "Shall I be tied to the manger to eat with my donkey?" By his sin Adam is cast down so low as to have to live out of the manger. Jesus, who St. Paul calls the second Adam, is born in—but rises out of—the manger to restore mankind's relationship with God.

The swaddling clothes reflects Wisdom's 7<sup>th</sup> chapter, where Solomon, the wealthiest of Judah's kings, affirms, "I was carefully swaddled and nursed, for no king has any other way to begin at birth."

The shepherds are linked with Bethlehem, the City of David the shepherd because the sheep raised between Jerusalem and Bethlehem were used for the sacrifices in the temple---Jesus would become the Lamb of God---the ultimate sacrifice who takes away the sins of the world.

When the angel of the Lord announces Jesus' birth, it is cast in the format of an imperial proclamation, to counter the Roman claim that Cesar Augustus was a God, to say instead that Jesus was the savior and source of peace whose birth marked a new beginning of time.

The chorus of the heavenly host sing in praise of what God has done in Bethlehem, an event as worth of angelic praise as the six days of creation and Isaiah hearing the seraphim, sing: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is filled with his glory." This is echoed on Palm Sunday when the whole multitude of the disciples began to rejoice and praise God with a loud voice saying: "Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord, Hosanna in the highest and peace in heaven and glory in the highest heavens."

We bring our lives to this Christmas liturgy so that we will better understand ourselves, our loved ones, our neighbors; and often we bring as well our strongest difficulties. If we were to catalogue the prayers uttered during a Christmas liturgy, they would probably be some of the

most profound in their simplicity: please God, bless my child who is ill; help my Dad find a good job; bring my son home safely; help our staggering relationship; help me learn to love more; give us peace. I believe, I am sorry. Somehow, because it is such a special feast, we entrust God tonight, in the image of an infant among us, the deepest desires of our minds and hearts. We suspect that on the celebration on his birth He will pay special attention to each one of us, as we pay special attention to Him. We are reassured that our prayer need not be lofty, or theologically astute, because we are celebrating the birth of a child.

We do not necessarily expect miracles. Yet, in some odd way, having confided our cares to our God, individually and as a community, we are indeed reborn. This continues to be cited as one of the most

powerful miracles of Christmas. We are not shamed by our needs, by our inadequacy, or by our poverty. Rather we are encouraged in our joy, accompanied in our sorrow, forgiven in our contrition, welcomed in our act of faith. Indeed, the Word has become flesh and continues to dwell among us, and of His grace we have all received.

We are reborn! Yet, very little in our external lives change. It is our spiritual life that has taken a giant leap forward. Christmas: the commemoration of the coming of Jesus into our world. How deeply it pierces the “ho-hum” of daily living. It catches us up short, if we give ourselves a minute to think about it. It is truly the celebration of the gift of Jesus to our world, not only on a global and societal level, but on a deeply

personal level as well. "In Him was life and the life was the light of all people."

We are reborn! Within ourselves we can see the difference and we can sense it in the mood of those around us: light has overcome our darkness, hope our despair; warmth has penetrated the coldness of our attitudes. Truly, it is a season and a feast to which we bring much expectation---hopes, dreams and desires for both our human and spiritual lives. Yet, even more than that, it is a feast of one to whom we can bring ourselves the way we are.

Well, look at us on this magical of nights. Here we have gathered on the most holy night of the year, around this crèche, below the soft dim lights of our nave. Just listen to our hymns and carols. We are singing with

our hearts and with our hope. We are singing with the belief that a savior has come to bring peace to our earth and the peace to our lives that we so desperately need. You would almost swear angels were ringing out the Good News of Jesus' birth all over again. If we have come seeking Christ's continued birth in our lives, desiring that His truth and His peace be reborn in us, if we come with our hearts filled with anticipation and mystery and fear, chances are, like the people of long ago, we too will be replete with awe. After all, that is the promise of Christmas: Christ has come; Christ continues to come. And Christ will come again for all of us who are seeking a new way, a new day, and peace on earth for all God's creation.

AMEN

