

Sermons at Christ Church

Be A Joyful Gift To Others.

Christmas Eve

Rev. Emmanuel Mercer

“And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Emmanuel, God with us. God is with us as a baby. Whenever I preach at this time of the year, I like to retell the familiar story about when I was first introduced at All Saints Episcopal in Atlanta, on a cold January morning. This is what the Rector said, “A couple of weeks ago we sung O Come, O Come Emmanuel. And now Emmanuel is here. Be careful what you wish for.”

We prayed for God to be with us, and God is here. Not as a powerful king but a baby. What are we to do with a story that begins with a baby?

Today, we will baptize Janiah-a beautiful baby girl. Like Mary and Joseph, Janiah’s parents have committed themselves to raising Janiah in the way of love.

The story of their lives began long before Janiah was born but here they are with God’s holy gift. Think about the day you last held a baby-think about your hope and joy. I can only imagine the eye of wonder with which Mary and Joseph looked at the baby Jesus-what child is this? They may have asked themselves.

What are we to do with a story that begins with a baby? Babies are special and adorable. Babies are also innocent and vulnerable. Babies depend on adults. Babies help us learn how to depend on each other. Babies help us recover our sense of the holy.

There’s a story of two great friends who liked to walk in the woods. They go out each day, especially when the weather is beautiful, to take long walks. One day as they walked, they came upon a grizzly bear. They both froze as they looked at the bear. The bear also stared at them. *“What do you want to do?”* One asked. *“Let’s just ran.”* The other responded. *“But you cannot outran a grizzly bear.”* The friend complained. *“I know I can’t outran a grizzly bear but I can outran you.”*

Imagine hearing that from a friend you have known for years-your friend actually believes that so long as he can outrun you, he doesn’t really care if the bear attacks you instead of him. His own life is of more importance than yours.

As sad as it sounds, that is the nature of our broken world. We have lost our sense of the holy-where we depend on each other, where we believe that a rising tide lifts all boats, where we believe that each person, no matter how young or old, rich or poor, healthy or frail, demands our attention and care.

We have lost our sense of what is holy-we look at people and think that they are unworthy because we are better than they are. We look at ourselves and think that we have made it-and when our ego sets in, we congratulate ourselves for making it by our own effort. We forget the grace that has been given to us. We forget the God who came to us as a baby and pours grace upon grace on us. We forget that the only difference between us and those we consider unworthy is fate or circumstance. We forget these wise words *"There but for the grace of God go I."*

The baby invites us to care for each other because we believe that each person is a miracle, each person is holy, each person tells a unique story of God.

What are we to do with a story that begins with a baby? A baby helps us mend our broken sense of the holy-the holy which hates the darkness of sin.

In the gospel, John announces that God's eternal Word has been made flesh and lives among us. He is the agent of God's new creation-where light overcomes darkness, trust overcomes cynicism, love overcomes fear, and confidence in the grace God has given us overcomes our insecurities.

Human insecurities lead us on perilous paths- where we commit the ultimate sin of denying the personhood and sacredness of those who don't look like us, live like us or believe like we do. And where human glory, the glory of being a house in which God chooses to dwell fades away and our dignity becomes a question of debate.

There was a study by two professors who they asked their research subjects a simple question. You are looking for work, and you have two job offers. One job offer will pay you \$100,000 per year. But your co-workers will make \$200,000 per year. The other job will pay \$50,000 per year and your co-workers will earn \$25,000 per year. The professors found that 50% of the respondents chose the second job offer.

This is at the heart of what is wrong in our society. We live in a society where people don't want to do better themselves. They actively want others to be doing worse than them. The issue for such people isn't so much about them making more money, they are concerned about what other people are making. We don't want to do better ourselves but we want to do better than others because we want to exercise a power that even questions their personhood.

This is what a baby teaches us. The baby doesn't care how much food it gets. All that the baby cares about is being full. Imagine if we lived in a society where are not constrained by our sin but root for those on the margins of our society, root for everyone and reject any power that we're tempted to exercise over another. Imagine that.

What are we to do with a story that begins with a baby? Listen to John, "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God." In other words, it is not by our bloodline, nor is it by our own power or will, nor is it by someone else's power or will that we become children of God, it is solely by the will of God.

The holy one came to dwell among us as a child and made us holy. The holy one gave us power to become children of God. For that reason, we believe that the holy is essential for human freedom and dignity. The holy signifies all of those things which cannot be bought or sold. You cannot buy or sell human dignity because it is holy, it is the gift of God to each of us, and it is the baby Jesus who makes it possible.

Meister Eckhart, A German theologian offers this prayer *"My work is to free myself from myself so that You can be born in me."* Today, the baby makes us aware that God can be born in each of us. Are you ready to make yourself available for God to be born in you? Are you ready to say yes to God?

You may have said yes before, you may have once opened yourself up for God to be born in you, but, like many, we struggle with our faith, with selfless giving and everything else. But don't be disappointed. Are you ready to try again? This New Year offers you the opportunity to try again.

Remember, we are a people on a pilgrimage, and we tell and retell the story of a baby whose presence among us remind us of our true divine selves- the place where God chose to dwell, the place which is a symbol of God's identification with us and solidarity with the world. The place where love welcomes everyone no matter where we are or where we've been-the place of unconditional love. But do I have access to my own self? Am I ready to open up my own self? Am I ready to look deep down into my own self and evaluate where in my life I can make those changes that reflect my daily experience with God?

What are we to do with a story that begins with a baby? It is a story of hope, mutual dependency, dignity, freedom and overcoming sin. We see in the Christ child, Janiah and every baby all the possibilities that await them. Tomorrow is like a new baby, New Year, new birth. I can only see the possibilities that God has in store for us. Because of the hope that the baby brings, I can only see water springing forth from the desert places of our lives.

Because of the renewal that the baby offers, I can only see God renewing our strength like that of an eagle. Because of the gift of this baby, I can only see God walking with us as we go through life's valleys and shadows of death.

Because of the comfort that the baby brings, I can sing of God's love and mercy. I can sing of the goodness of God. Because of the self-emptying and gracious giving of this baby, all I can see is the giving of myself without any questions. Because of this baby, I can only see the value that God has for each of us. And that value makes us holy.

My beloved, I give thanks to God for you, your family and this community of faith. I give thanks to the God who didn't consider our station in life but chose to be born in us. I give thanks to God that through this gift of baby Jesus, we can recover our sense of the holy. May we live as holy and faithful people in the coming year. Happy New Year. **Amen.**