

Sermons at Christ Church

Be a Joyful Gift to Others.

Christmas Eve

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So the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; that he is to usher a new era of peace and goodwill, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. All who heard the Christmas story the shepherds told them were amazed because it appeared that human salvation was now so close than ever before.

The Christmas story is the best story ever told-not only for its complexity, mystique and the individuals involved but because the story taps into a long held human desire for union with the divine.

I believe that the Christmas story the best story ever told because it invites us to ponder our true humanity. Who you are. Who I am. And who we all are in relation to the divine. The question is, what is so darn special about you or me that God would stoop so low to take on our corruptible flesh?

This is the question that the incarnation seeks to answer-that you are God's masterpiece and that the human project isn't hopeless, that there's a purpose to the human story, there is a telos to the human enterprise and so we cannot give up on ourselves.

There's a story of a little girl who goes to her mother with this question, mother, how did human beings come about? How did you and I come about? The mom patiently responded, God created Adam and Eve, and they had children, and their children had children and so on till grandmother had me and I had you. She then goes to her father and asked the same question. Dad, how did human beings come about? How did you and mom and me come about?

The father responded, well, the human story began with apes, our ancestors are apes, mother ape gave birth to baby ape for millions of years until over time human beings evolved and grandma gave birth to me and now you.

The little girl was so confused so she went back to her mother with her father's version of how they all came about. After listening to the little girl, the mother said to the little girl, your father's version is his side of the family. They may have come from apes but mine did not.

Whichever side of the story your family comes from, there's always been a human longing to determine where we come from, and if we come from the divine, for the divine to be present in our lives and in our condition. We clamor to see traces of the divine in our stories-to know that the divine is part of our narrative. Unity with God was to fill our void and satisfy the emptiness we feel in our lives-you can call it a drive towards meaning.

Christmas is the best story ever told because within this story, we experience a God who takes steps in fulfilling human longing, whose desire has been about humans who are fully alive in our humanness and in God, such that we refuse to live in the agony of sin and dehumanization.

In his book on *Miracles*, C.S. Lewis wrote that "The central miracle asserted by the Christian is the incarnation. They say that God became man...If the thing happened, it was the central event in the history of the earth, the very thing the whole story has been about."¹

If C.S. Lewis is right, then it is fair to argue that without the incarnation, there would be no theology, there would be no story. The incarnation forms the basis of the Christian identity and understanding of God.

In the beautiful Christmas story, human hopes and fears converge in a little baby boy-the Word of God which cannot speak a Word but who upends the status quo, the hungry are fed, the humble lifted high the proud brought low, the powerless are made powerful.

The Christmas story is a transforming story because it establishes a new creation where human freedom finds its meaning in love. And the beauty in the story is that it compels me to call you a brother or sister, and makes me aware of the duty that I owe you. And the duty that I owe you as a brother or sister, finds its fulfillment in love.

The Christmas story reminds us of the sacrifice of God. That God who is wholly other, transcendent, boundless in His personhood, and is infinitely good and pure, would set aside the glory of His heaven, and sacrifice that very nature to assume the limitations of people like you and me. This is a God who acted to change the human story through the sacrifice.

And in doing so, God did not assume a special nature which would have made it impossible for him to deal with the pain, sickness, hurt, disappointment, hunger, tears, thirst, violence, anger or even death-experiences of suffering that we and the people we love go through on a daily basis.

¹ Lewis, C.S. *The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classic* p.398

More than that, the suffering that Jesus endured, which we also endure is meant for us to understand that suffering is part of the human story, and to suffer doesn't mean that you have been abandoned by God. God understands human suffering and walks with us through our suffering.

One of the early theologians of the Church-Tertullian, refers to the incarnation as awkward, but then even in its awkwardness we are invited to embrace all the awkwardness and the glory of being human in the promise of a baby.

Behind the incarnation is a story. And the heart of that story is the Christmas proclamation that every human being is the place where God chooses to dwell-it is a beautiful story. Think about it, you are the very place where God chooses to dwell. From this conviction comes our belief in human rights and the dignity of every human being-irrespective of their race, sex, gender or ethnicity.

Every human being is-Bethel, house of God- that is the affirmation of the Christmas story. Emmanuel – a baby who is God in us, God with us and even in the mess of our lives. And because each of us is a house of God, we do not have to desire God as if God were lacking-God is buried deep in our lives. Human redemption is no longer a question of pursuit but one of surrender-total surrender to the God who believes in you and loves you unconditionally because you are the masterpiece.

There's a story of a man whose desire was to find God in heaven. But then he was hit with the reality that it is not in heaven that we find God, it is in God that we find heaven. And heaven's light overpowers all our darkness so we may behold the new thing that God is doing with us and among us-shaping our often formless lives, filling our often empty lives, bringing meaning to our often hopeless lives, pulling us out of the darkened pit of our lives and restoring us from being exiled from Him and from our true selves.

The Christmas story brings life to the love of God. If God is love, then His glory most of all shines forth in anything that fully expresses God's love and wherever love is, there you will find the story of redemption, hope, renewal, forgiveness, compassion, justice, reconciliation, peace and transformation.

If the first creation story is about the gift of being human, the second creation story realized in the incarnation of Jesus, the best story ever told is about the choices we make on a daily basis, and these choices often require us to humbly descend deep into ourselves to find our true humanity. Our true humanity is about a new person who is empowered to unwrap themselves from the darkness with which we have covered ourselves.

Tonight, we look into the future by looking backwards. We look back at the shepherds who saw a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and pronouncing God's peace on earth and goodwill towards men and women.

Tonight, God comes to us in the lowliest and vulnerable estate-God comes to us in the form of a baby who will transform human fears and hopes into the light of God's love.

We may not understand this beautiful story. We may not understand the how and the why-but we don't have to. Like the shepherds, nothing should stop us from sharing the message of peace and goodwill with the world-heaven bears witness that our lives and world needs this message of goodwill today.

And if we dare to accept the message of peace and goodwill which this little child brings, our lives and world would be like a tea bag in hot water, a world saturated with God's presence and peace-that's the beauty of Christmas and I hope, like the shepherds, you too would carry this beautiful message with you wherever you go. Amen.