

Christmas Eve, 2016

Merry Christmas!

Tonight we gather to be with family and friends, sing carols, listen to the story of Jesus' birth, and consider again the meaning of Christmas. Here is the seven word meaning—"God became human and dwelt among us." That's it. Everything else might be a useful reflection or a nice addition or possibly a sneaky distraction, but the truth of "God became human and dwelt among us" is the meaning.

What we remember this night is the story about how the divine became human. There were no shortcuts, no arriving fully grown and powerful and wise. No, we believe God was somehow mysteriously conceived within Mary's womb and born as a helpless baby. Truly amazing. Jesus' birth is the beginning of what became the Christian faith. We do well to remember this origin story and live our lives based on this deep truth.

Tonight's epistle reading describes it this way-- "the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." In other words, God showed up in that special baby and changed everything. Jesus changed how we understand God—and how we understand being human. If we believe in Jesus, God is no longer some vague, distant spirit who seems indifferent to human suffering. Rather, God showed up in Jesus and "lived and died as one of us," as our liturgy states. We believe God is with us and is on our side.

By becoming one of us, God also changed how we understand other humans-- and ourselves. Humans can be nasty and do bad things—the news is full of those accounts. But those stories of our worst behavior are not the final story of what it means to be human. Jesus' birth and holy life transforms the human condition and empowers our potential for goodness. We believe we can live differently because of Jesus and by following him as our Savior and Lord.

When we follow Jesus, we accept God's forgiveness of us and have grace to forgive others, too. We can be kind to all people-- even to those who are difficult to love and especially to those who are weak. We can be strong—enduring pain and standing up to injustice. We can cry out to God and ask hard questions when we pray. And even with our questions unresolved, we can still have the faith to act and do what we know is right. Those are some of the things we can do as humans because Jesus "lived and died as one of us."

Tonight, though, we focus especially on the birth of Jesus, God coming among us as a baby. How remarkable this part of the story of Jesus is. Now for most people, there is something about babies. They can make even grouchy people smile (well, except when they are crying on a plane).

Babies and little children are like a sacrament to us—that is, an outward sign of an inward grace. When we see a baby—even if they are not the Son of God—we are attracted to

them and celebrate the joy of that bundle of new life. There is something about seeing an adult talking baby talk to an infant that just makes us smile.

It is about more than just sentiment, though. Babies represent the complexity of human life and by extension the mystery of God's life among us. Babies are cute and cuddly but like the birth narrative of Jesus, babies sometimes show up in challenging times and in difficult circumstances. But even when times are hard, and their births might make things harder, babies still convey God's grace to us as God touches our hearts to respond to their needs.

The adult Jesus taught us this in the Gospel of Mark. There is no story of Jesus' birth in this shorter Gospel—Jesus shows up full grown. But Jesus used a little child to teach his closest followers about what it means to be **truly great**. You see, right before this story, his followers had been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest—some things about being human never change. Here is what Jesus said and did in response:

*Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'*

That is his adult message for us as we consider the baby Jesus on this holy tonight. Children teach us something central to our understanding of God and about what God calls us to be as human beings. Like his disciples learned, it is **not** arguing with each other about greatness. Rather it is about God calling us to be kind and to serve and care for people who are vulnerable, especially little babies. This is what God-made-human taught us.

So how do we practice this part of our faith, this way to connect with God? Many of us get to experience caring for children through our own families—as mothers and fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, big brothers and sisters. The sacrament of children is built into families of all types. So that is a part of nature.

But if our children are grown up and we don't have grandchildren yet; or if we have never had our own children; we can find other ways to connect with God through children. We can walk downstairs to the nursery and, with a little training, help care for the children of our parish. I guarantee the help would be appreciated! You can hold them, play with them, feed them, and do all the loving work that humbles us and makes us great according to Jesus.

Or we can go a little farther away and help with Family Promise at St Columba or Christ the King Lutheran, local churches we have agreed to help as a "support parish." Family Promise provides transitional housing for families working to move from homelessness back to living on their own. When you go to help out at one of these churches, you will find children there to love and play with and listen to. Those encounters are ways for us to welcome a child in our lives and discover we are welcoming God, too.

Or we can go much farther away and go with Mother Bonnie on a mission trip to Honduras. I can tell you first hand that being with children down there really touched me. It is

easy in life for us to get too busy, to focus on work and what's next and the big adult issues of our lives. But the children and the Tias (or aunties) who are employed to take care of the children at LAMB can bring us a very different perspective.

One afternoon when I was down there, after helping repair some fences, Amanda and I gave ourselves a treat and hung out with the youngest children at the home. Most of them are two or three years old. We watched them sit still—or as still as they could—as they were given fresh papaya to eat. Then at Amanda's urging, I got down on the floor and waited for them to finish their snack and get cleaned up.

Just like Amanda promised, I was soon covered up with children. They didn't want to talk politics (thank God) or the latest economic trends or even theology. They wanted to play. They wanted to hug me around the neck and be hugged. They wanted to be thrown high up in the air—over and over. They wanted to have fun.

The time I spent with these beautiful children in Honduras was very special to me like I know it is for so many people who go down there. Jesus promised us that God would show up if we show up for children—and God did. It felt like I was welcoming God among us through those little ones. Being with and caring for children is a way to experience God and meet real human needs—theirs and ours.

So this Christmas Eve, we proclaim that God is with us, that God is one of us, and that God showed up as a little baby. We believe that we can find God in many ways—in the Bible, in the church, in prayer, in art and nature, and in service of others. All of those ways are good and holy and important; but one of the best ways we can find God is how we make time to love and care for the children in our lives and in the world. Amen.

Merry Christmas!