

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalm 96

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

It's Christmas Eve and the air is filled with anticipation and expectation and memories of Christmases past as well as a To Do List for this year that has no ending. Every year those memories and expectations crowd in on us as we anticipate the arrival of the baby Jesus. More than once, Jesus, as a grown man and roving preacher, told us that the kingdom of heaven, which he brought to share with us, can be experienced only by those who have the faith and acceptance of a child. Children are ready to hear anything and believe anything that they hear from adults. One of my favorite stories about Christmas and the nativity is about a little boy...about four years old...in Sunday School class who was asked with all the rest of the children...to draw a picture of the nativity. This child was very earnest and set about using every crayon color he had and added many details that the teacher didn't realize she had described to the class. He worked meticulously so that he could get the nativity presented exactly as he imagined it. When he finished, he proudly presented his drawing to his teacher who began to ask questions. Who is this? .....she would say. And the little boy would answer. She pointed to every figure in his nativity scene and finally came to the figure that puzzled her. She pointed to a very round, fat man standing in the corner of the stable and she asked the little boy, "And who is this?" With great pride and excitement, he sat up very straight and said to her, "Oh, that's Round John Virgin." Children believe everything they hear and sometimes we don't realize that what they heard is not what we meant!

Christianity demands a certain amount of acceptance of phenomena that we cannot explain. We don't know enough about God or enough about the laws of nature to be able to explain Jesus, his ministry, the kingdom of God or the nature of God. It's all too complicated...and so much of it doesn't make sense to our very finite brains and hearts. Jesus told us in his preaching that unless we have the heart and the trust of a child, we won't be able to inherit the kingdom of God. So what is it about children that we abandon as we grow up? Perhaps it's our ability to accept what isn't logical or what cannot be explained by the laws of nature. Perhaps it's our inability to suspend logic and embrace the experience exactly as it is. How in the world, for example, do we explain Jesus in the manger and Santa Claus coming down the chimney as part of the same experience? It's not logical. And yet children have no problem embracing both. And how do we combine the resurrection of Jesus into new life and the Easter Bunny? They are in no way connected and yet children rarely if ever want an explanation for why and how the resurrection of Jesus and the Easter bunny are connected. They don't seem to need a logical

explanation. They are accepting of what adults tell them...and adults tell them...or imply...that these disparate things go together and children believe.

Having children in our lives...whether they are relatives or friends or neighbors...gives us some insight into how Jesus wants us to approach Him and approach God. In so many instances, we need to be able to suspend logic. And we need to be able to accept at face value what we cannot explain or understand. It's a tall order...but not for children. If you can comfortably fit the baby Jesus and Santa Claus and the resurrection and the Easter Bunny into the same scenario, then it's pretty obvious that logic has nothing to do with it. And logic does not have anything to do with it.

The entrance of the Son of God into the world as a helpless infant begins the process of God's revelation to the world about the nature of God. God wants us to know God. The first thing the angels say to any of the characters involved in this story is, "Fear not!" It's a necessary command because human beings tend to be terrified of phenomena that grab their attention but cannot be understood by the finite brains of humans. The angels don't want Mary or the shepherds or any other human they encounter to be afraid of what they are experiencing. And yet, the experience before them is terrifying. The inexplicable is often terrifying...or summarily dismissed as not 'real' or not 'possible' because the finite brain and the hardened heart of the average human being can't explain it. And if it cannot be explained, then it must not be real. That's a false assumption. Just because we don't understand something or can't explain it does not mean that it's not real. It's complicated. Faith is being able to accept it at face value.

And what does God want us to know about God and the power of God and the love of God through the entrance of Jesus into the world as a helpless infant? There's nothing on earth more appealing than a baby. God made them that way so that adult humans would be drawn to them and would want to take care of them. Does God want to be appealing to us? Perhaps. But babies are more than just adorable. Babies are incredibly helpless and non-threatening. Other than making adults miss a few hours of sleep, a baby has no power to do anything to any other human being...adult or child. Does God want us to see God as non-threatening? Possibly. God does not want us to be afraid. Every time God breaks into the world of human beings, there's an angel involved whose first words are, "Do not be afraid!" God is powerful enough to send his Son into the world of earth as a human baby. And God is loving enough to place His only begotten Son into the realm of humans. That's a powerful amount of love. And it's complicated. Just like humans, God loves His Son and also knows what will happen to His Son at the hands of human beings even as the Son has been sent here to show us what God's love looks like and how God wants us to behave...toward God and toward each other. Knowing what will eventually happen to Jesus, God sends him on this mission anyway. And he goes. That's more

love than any of us have or can even imagine. Jesus' birth is a gesture of God not abandoning creation, but ever working to connect humanity across time and to each other and to God's self. And it shows us that God intends to approach us with His vulnerability rather than with His power. Whereas Rome operated through 'shock and awe' and brute power, God operates through understated means. The story of the nativity alerts listeners to look for how God continues to work through such means in our world. God must want us to know that God is not going to overpower us, but will approach us from a place of humility and humbleness. How can an entity that flaunts humility, not power, be so powerful? It's complicated.

God's mission is clear in sending Jesus to us as a baby. God's devotion to his creation is never in question. God wants to get our attention. And God does. God does not want us to feel threatened or coerced, but wants to draw us to himself slowly and safely. God never forces us to be in relationship with God. We are never abandoned because we don't behave well or because God is disappointed with us. God is not interested in who among us is naughty and who is nice. God's love is constant and indestructible. There is no way that God is going to stop loving us or that God is going to turn a cold shoulder to us. The understanding of the identity and work of Jesus Christ and God's love for the world is the message that rings through loud and clear in this nativity scene. Jesus's Nativity is God's statement of victory, and it is a victory that announces God's delight in humanity. It is without fanfare. It is without public recognition. It is without an overt demonstration of power and might. It is without reservation or judgment of the failings of human beings. It is an act of pure love. And its' complicated.

This night is a hard night to preach. This event is a hard one to describe with any credibility. The best a preacher can do on Christmas Eve is to bear witness to the unimaginable and invite all who will listen into the absurd wonder of the moment. It is enough. For all of the preacher's preparation and potential hopes and fears this night, preachers are not the bringers of the magic or wonder, but are witnesses of the mystery of God's incarnation — along with the shepherds and all of creation. We all need to hear this story...over and over again...so that all the logic of our brains that wants to shut out the reality of this night will be put to rest and our hearts can fully embrace what we know to be truly real and life giving. It's complicated.

And each one of us brings to this night our own experiences, both past and present, of Christmas and all the magic and wonder we long to embrace. And we also bring to this experience all the heartbreak and disappointments of this life that we carry in our hearts and that continue to cause us pain and anguish. We bring all those broken pieces of our lives and ourselves to the stable and place them in the manger with the baby Jesus that they might be redeemed by Him and we might walk away from this memorable night knowing that we are loved and valued and mended beyond measure. No matter our disappointments or our

shortcomings, we can thrive in the knowledge that God created us, God loves us, God values who we are, God hurts with us, God comforts us, God strengthens us, God walks with us every step of the way. And God has come to be with us in a tangible way. It's complicated. And it's real.

May the love of God revealed through the birth of Jesus Christ be known to us this night and always.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.