

Sermon 122417 Christmas
Scripture- Matthew 1: 18-25
Sermon Title- Joy To The World

The time for singing has come. It is the Christmas season again. The old mystery is happening once more, and the hardness eases from our hearts. The ice leaves our eyes and the glow of human warmth returns. It is Christmas again, and the coldness of our bearing turns to smiles and good cheer. Music and good tidings fill the air.

Christmas is a time of mystery. The world becomes suddenly, and for a while, fresh again. Minds that are long accustomed to suspicion open for a while in gladness and wonder. The least spiritually sensitive person among us senses that what Christmas celebrates is far and away beyond the ordinary.

It is a mystery. We cannot fully discern the meaning of this strange and inexplicable Christmas event. The Christ is born! When we hear that, it does not take the slightest knowledge of theological terms and concepts to catch the feeling that God is near. Sure, we enjoy the human trimmings, the tinsel and trees, the cakes and candy, the squealing of children, the singing of carols, and the rest. But underneath it all lies something else, the Christmas mystery.

When we read the opening line of this morning's Gospel lesson from Matthew, "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about" (Mt 1:18a) it shortens a breath. That night lo so many years ago when Christ was born was charged with the divine, pregnant with the eternal, not

only in that place of Bethlehem, but in the whole world. That night there were elements of a strange and baffling mystery. There was the mystery of birth, of infancy. The Christ's arrival was not heralded in the great court of a bejeweled emperor. No armies marched. No silver trumpet blared. No drums sounded. Instead, the word was, "Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." (Lk 2: 12)

The mystery of infancy is the mystery of God giving the world a fresh start. In any childbirth, newness emerges out of the oldness. I suppose that there is a statement spoken most by parents of the newly born. If it is not spoken it is held in the heart. The statement is, "I want my child to have a better life than I have had." People see their children representing something fresh and hopeful. A newborn represents something bright and full of potential that is not bound by the tired past. Every child says that God's power is not exhausted. Newness is a fresh start. Goodness can blossom where sin and ugliness have lived.

The mystery of a child is the mystery of a new beginning. Each child is born into a world of adults whose bones are hardened, whose habits are formed, whose opinions are fixed, whose hopes are dimmed, whose hearts have been chilled. But a baby is a new creature, to whom vast horizons are waiting to be surpassed. Any child can be the beginning of a new era in the world. There may be in a nursery today, or maybe in a home somewhere, in your family maybe, a life that will

one-day lift the scourge of cancer from the human race. Or some child among us might someday open new gates of liberty and dignity to sons and daughters of the world.

The birth of Jesus Christ that we celebrate on Christmas heralds the arrival of a new chance for the children of God. He is the way to new life. He offers humanity a fresh start. He is empowered to say, “Your sins are forgiven.” He arrives with the news that we can make it right with God and we can do it through him. It is when we stand before that precious baby lying in a manger that we have that moment of peace that surpasses all understanding. It is then that we sense the depth of meaning of words like, ‘awe’ and ‘glory’ and ‘joy.’

It is also in that moment that we are reminded of the mission of the baby Jesus... to save us from our sinfulness. The newborn King reminds us of the need that we have for him. In the time of ‘peace’ and ‘joy’ we are confronted with our own sin and selfishness. God has come to this hard and messy world because we have lost sight of the divine in our own worldly preoccupations. The birth of Jesus, more than any other, reminds us that God has not given up on us.

Sin was there at the birth of Jesus and is still here in the celebration of his birth. It is here uninvited but it is here none-the-less. Where did sin come from? That is a mystery, too. Surely it did not come from God. God looked around at the creation and said, “It is very good.” Yet, sin is with us. We have the right to celebrate the joys and gladness

of Christmas time. However, we have no right to let the tinsel and turkey and trimmings blind us to the ugliness in this world and in our own nature.

What does the birth of Christ do for us? It gives us a second chance. We are the religion of second chances. The birth gives us a new start, each one of us, as we strive to become the person that God wants us to be. The birth of Jesus means that we now have all we need to do just that. The mystery of Christmas surpasses the mystery of sin.

Christmas heralds the invasion of God into our world. People have felt and feared that God is far removed from the meager affairs of the people of earth. How often do we hear that God cannot be bothered with this or that. Some believe in God as primary mover, as building the clock, getting it started, and then resigning from active participation. But Christmas says that God has never given up on the world. Even at its worst, God is interested in the world, so interested that God identifies God's self with us. God is afflicted when we are afflicted. So, God arrives in the form of a newborn baby who is the way to salvation. The mystery baffles us but it wins us.

The event of the Christ child and his life story was so momentous that it changed the world. It is still changing the world. The people who knew Jesus were forced to think of him beyond merely human terms. They saw in him the very presence of the divine. They told others of

him and word spread like wildfire. The Christmas event changed human history like no other.

With his birth, the eternal had entered the world of time. God came among humans as one of us in the ultimate act of empathy and identification. “For God so love the world he gave his one and only son.” (John 3: 16) Christmas is our evidence that far from abandoning the world, God has emerged into the sorrow and pain and death of it all. This is the glorious good news of Christmas, the best news the world has ever known.

The news is so wonderful that one can understand how we find it incredible and unbelievable. But there it all is. This is the gospel, the good news. “The young woman will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel-which means, God with us” (Is 7: 14, Mt 1: 23) We know that this time, this year, we need God with us more than any time in human history. So let the beautiful mystery of Christmas wash us clean. Sound the glad sound of music. Let every heart rejoice. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come, let earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing.”
AMEN