

“The Joy of God’s Children”  
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St. Luke’s Episcopal Church – Anchorage, Kentucky  
1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas – 29 & 30 December 2018  
Galatians 3:23-36; 4:4-7; John 1:1-18

There may be nothing more delightful than the face of a small child on Christmas morning. While they fitfully slept, a welcome intruder entered their home to give, not to take. Once awake, those children experience the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams, or at least some of them. Santa Claus rarely brings every item on the wish list, but that doesn’t matter much in most cases. A benevolent, brightly-dressed man, who needs to lose a little weight, left presents for them with no expectation of return, though the cookies left for him are most definitely appreciated. (Santa told me that himself.) Santa’s visit also validates the essential goodness of a child, confirming that on balance they’ve been nicer instead of naughtier. Whatever their shortcomings, the disobedience and meltdowns have been forgiven, and the gift delivered.

The beaming joy of a child at Christmas kindles fond memories for most adults who witness it, memories of a simpler, more innocent time in own lives, when sleep came hard on Christmas night, and morning brought an irrepressible feeling of joy. Perhaps we feel just the slightest tinge of envy, too, because that sort of keen excitement fades a bit with age.

Yet as we grow, both in years and in faith, we can receive an even greater joy brought by a more profound mystery. We adults may not receive toys from Santa Claus anymore, but a sense of awe and wonder still bursts forth at Christmas, because this time of year reminds us that we can become children again.

The gifts stuffed in stockings or laid beneath a tree are symbols of a greater gift, somewhat less tangible but no less real. Christmas brings us the creative Word that brought all creation into being, a Word made flesh in Bethlehem, come to set us free so that we can be

children of God. As Paul wrote in his Letter to the Galatians, “Christ came . . . so that we might receive adoption as children.” Likewise, John in his Gospel reveals that for those who embrace Jesus, “he gave power to become children of God.”

Now some of us may have trouble embracing that idea, because for some of us, childhood was not a good experience. Physical or emotional abuse, a dysfunctional family life, or overly stern discipline could make childhood something we want to escape, leave behind, and forget. But even those who suffered the greatest harm know that what happened was wrong. It was not how it was supposed to be, because other kids had very different experiences. They were helped, not hurt; comforted, not berated. So there’s an alternative, a different way of being treated, and God is the perfect parent, loving and kind, who can bring healing to our lives, even to childhood memories that still give us nightmares.

Others among us object to this whole “child of God” business because it offends our pride and sense of independence. We like to think of ourselves as sophisticated grownups, powerful and self-sufficient. If that’s our problem, then we need to let go of it and grow in faith and in humility. Settling down with the idea that, in God’s eyes, all of us are children brings humility, because we begin to realize that any power we possess comes from God and that we are not self-sufficient or independent. Instead, we rely and depend on God for everything.

John makes this clear at the outset of his Gospel. To him, Jesus embodies the creative force of God, the Word of God that literally spoke creation into being. God said “Let there be,” and whatever God said became reality. Referring to Jesus, John wrote, “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” So our assumption that we are in any way self-made, no matter how hard we’ve worked, is mistaken. All that we are, have been, or ever will be are gracious gifts of God. Our presence here right now, the air that we’re

breathing, none of it would exist without the Word reverberating throughout cosmos, holding all things in being.

The presence of Jesus unleashes an overflowing fullness into emptiness. It releases us from the grip of sin and empowers us to enjoy life, aware that we have been accepted and embraced by a God who loves us more than we can imagine, and this helps free us from worry and despair.

In exchange for that wondrous gift, God desires nothing more than acceptance. Milk and cookies are not required, though the offering of our souls and bodies is most definitely appreciated and only natural. For when we receive the grace that unbinds and transforms our lives, a huge lunge of gratitude leaps out of our hearts.

And while we are most mindful of this amazing gift of grace around times like Christmas and Easter, the grace once poured forth never stops flowing. It is available every day to those ready to receive it. That grace bears enough power to help overcome our challenges and disappointments. That grace gives more than a momentary joy. It delivers an abiding sense of peace, where joy can dwell as a constant light, guiding our path and dispelling the threatening darkness of our world. Unlike toys that break or become boring, the grace made present in Jesus stays fresh. Unlike the flash of excitement that fades as the wrapping and ribbon is tossed in the trash, the joy of Jesus stays with us.

When we receive faith and become adopted children of God, it fundamentally alters us, just as the lives of children radically change when loving parents adopt them. Our perception shifts, as does our behavior. Some things that once seemed vitally important become much less of a priorities. Our ambition gets redirected toward what God wants for our lives and for His world. We notice things that we once ignore or simply didn't see. We start to understand that

what is commonly called the “real” world is a lie. The only real world is the one where God is present and honored and worshipped and obeyed.

When we respond to grace, we become less childish and more childlike, with a renewed sense of innocence – not of naïve type, but an innocence that brings the best parts of childhood back: awe, wonder, imagination, irrepressible joy. Grace liberates us from what weighs us down and lifts us up. It invites us to whole new life, a transformation that comes from a single source: the grace of God revealed in Jesus, the Word made flesh.

So let’s hold on to the sense of joy and wonder brought by the gift of grace, embodied at Christmas. Let’s be grateful, and remember that we are children of God. Let’s be at peace in the fullness of Jesus: accepted, forgiven, loved, and free. Amen.