

Christmas (Eve) Day, Years AB&C, 2008
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This is a very holy day because we celebrate the birth of our Lord. The stories that have come to us tell us that Jesus was born in the most humble of circumstances, born to impoverished parents, in a small village near Jerusalem. As Mary's birthing moment drew close, a government tax census required that people return to the towns of their birth for counting. Bethlehem was jammed with people and there was no place for Mary and Joseph to stay. Apparently, a kind soul gave Joseph permission for Mary to rest in the animal stable. Jesus was born in that stable and he rested in a quickly improvised straw bed.

We marvel at this, but when you think about it the story at this point contains nothing that is really remarkable. Thousands of kids are born in such circumstances, even today. Contrasts of poverty and wealth seem ingrained in the human condition. Some folk have and some folk have not; this has never changed and probably never will. What is remarkable about this story is that we believe that the child, born to a peasant woman, about the age of thirteen, whose name was Mary, was the long-expected Messiah, the Son of God. The reason that we are amazed at the circumstances of our Lord's birth is we think, perhaps at levels and in ways we are not totally aware of, that the Son of God should have had a somewhat higher social status during his earthly pilgrimage; perhaps he should have been king's son, or the governor's son, or at least a high priest's son. Certainly he should have been in no way related to the illiterate, rough-work carpenter that Bible scholars tell us Joseph was. Perhaps this should tell us something about God's values. The church has always taught, from the earliest time, that God humbled himself in taking on human form, so that through Christ we might ourselves be transformed into a likeness of God. We are just shocked at how thoroughly God humbled himself, but in Christ, God meets us where we are. This is the whole point of the Christmas story.

Isaiah, the Old Testament prophet said, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy ... for a child has been born for us, a son given to us; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace."

Jesus forever changed the relationship between God and man and the birth stories tell us, first and foremost, that God took the form of man because he wanted to become one with us. He lived and died as one of us. God took on not just our flesh, but our needs and our emotional frailties, our hopes, our dreams and our fears. Christmas tells us that God loves us so much that he became one with us. God's love is not something just speculative or philosophical. It is very, very real. The Incarnation tells us that God identified with us, that God empathized with us. To truly empathize with someone is to actually feel your way into his psyche, into his soul, so that you can understand the person at the most profound depth. Empathy has great healing power. And the healing power of God's empathy for us is this: in spite of our humanity, our fears, doubts, dreads, anger, selfishness, all those traits that turn others away from us and cause them to even to hate us, God loves us. It is as simple as that. God knows the depths of our souls, and in spite of what he sees, he still loves us unconditionally. The nativity of Jesus tells us that we are

worthwhile in the eyes of God and God chose to identify with us. I hope you understand that it is this belief that sets Christianity apart from other religions.

Christmas tells us that a new and hopeful light shines in our world. The light is the light of Christ, the light of peace and goodwill among all peoples. The world is tragically far from embracing that light of goodwill. Were the world to do so, there would be peace among all nations and peoples. Instead, prejudice and fear tear us apart. Many people are blind to the good in those from whom they differ. But even though we are blind, God does not give up on us. We might, indeed be spiritually blind, but in Christ we can come to see. John Newton, author of the hymn *Amazing Grace*, wrote, "I once was lost, but now I'm found; was blind, but now I see." In Christ, we can rise above pettiness and insensitivity, beyond bigotry, prejudice and hatred; so hope for the world continues with each and every Christmas.

I do not think that we shall ever have the peace that God wants for us until we really learn to treat each other in a truly Christian way and the Christian way is inclusive, not exclusive. The Christian way transcends all those things that separate us from our neighbor, whatever they are - religious differences, cultural differences or bigotry, prejudice and uncharitable assumptions we make about people who differ from us. God does not differentiate in this way; neither must we.

Jesus said that what is required of us is that we love our neighbor. The Old Testament prophet Mica said that what God wants is for us to show mercy and justice and walk humbly with God. If we do these things, loving others as Christ loves us and showing mercy and justice with great humility, and if we mean what we say when we ask God to forgive our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, then we are living out the Christian model. We may not be able to fix the problems of the world overnight, but I think that Christian love is contagious. Who knows what could happen?

This day we celebrate the birth of true hope. Today we celebrate the dream of everlasting peace. Tonight we pray that someday people everywhere, in all places, in all nations in all human conditions may come together to the banquet table of God, in the fellowship of Jesus, and be at peace in the everlasting love of God. *Amen.*